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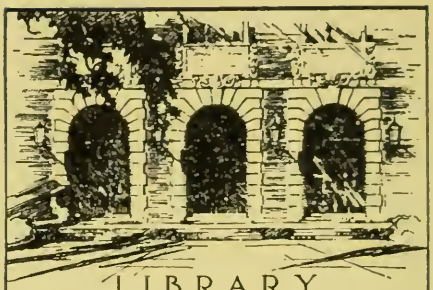

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MR SMITH

A PART OF HIS LIFE

BY

L. B. WALFORD

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
EDINBURGH AND LONDON
MDCCCLXXIV

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MR SMITH:

A PART OF HIS LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

MR SMITH.

A SHORT, stout, grey man.

Mr Smith.

The butcher was disappointed that he wasn't a family. He had been led to expect that he was a family. All the time that house was building he had made up his mind that it was for a family.

There was rooms in it as ought to have been family rooms. There was rooms as meant roast-beef, and there was rooms as meant saddles of mutton and sweetbreads. In his mind's eye he had already provided the servants' hall with rounds, both fresh and salt; and treated the housekeeper to private

and confidential kidneys. He had seen sick children ordered tender knuckles of veal, and growing ones strong soup. He had seen his own car at the back-door every morning of the week.

After all, it was too provoking to come down to—Mr Smith.

The butcher set the example, and the grocer and the baker were both ready enough to follow.

They were sure they thought there was a family. Somebody had told them so. They couldn't rightly remember who, but they were sure it was somebody. It might have been Mr Harrop, or it might have been Mr Jessamy.

Harrop was the innkeeper, and, with an innkeeper's independence, denied the imputation flat.

He had never said a word of the sort. He had never mentioned such a thing as a family. Leastwise, it would be very queer if he had, seeing as how he had never thought it. He always knew Mr Smith was Mr Smith, a single gentleman with no encumbrances; but he must confess that, as to the gentleman himself, he had been led to expect that he was somehow or other different. Some one had told him—he couldn't rightly remember

who at the moment—that he was a young, dashing spark, who took a deal of wine, and kept a many horses. Likewise, his informant had stated, he had a valet.

J. Jessamy, hairdresser and perfumer, 39 High Street, corroborated the last statement. He didn't know about his being young, but he understood that he had been one as cared about his appearance. At the very first sight of Mr Smith, with his thick iron-grey whiskers and clean-shaved lip, Jessamy threw down the box of sponges he was arranging, and exclaimed aloud, "A man can't make his bread off whiskers!"

Mrs Hunt, the doctor's wife, from her window over the way, saw the sponges fall, and caught sight of Mr Smith.

In her private mind she was very much of the innkeeper's opinion. The doctor might wish for a family, but her desires took a different form. A Mr Smith satisfied them very well, but he should have been another sort of Mr Smith.

A Mr Smith of twenty or thirty, amiable, handsome, unmarried, was the Mr Smith she had fondly hoped to welcome.

But this old gentleman? *No.*

Neither Maria nor Clare would ever look at him, she was sure of that; girls were so foolish. Those silly Tolletons would laugh at him, as they did at everybody, and Maria and Clare would join in with them.

Her face grew gloomy at the prospect, as she looked after Mr Smith walking down the street.

Many pairs of eyes followed Mr Smith walking down the street that day.

He had arrived the previous night, and had not been seen before. The disappointment was universal. This Smith was not the man for them. That was the conclusion each one arrived at for the present. The future must take care of itself.

The short, stout, grey man entered the post-office, and inquired if there were any letters for him.

"What name, sir?"

"Mr Smith."

Mr Smith got his letters, and then the postmaster came out to a lady who was sitting in her pony-carriage at the door.

"Beg pardon for keeping you, my lady; but had to get such a number for Mr Smith."

"So that is Mr Smith," thought she, taking her letters. "And very like a Mr Smith, too."

It was but a glance; but the glance which enabled her to ascertain so much, caused her to let slip a letter from the budget, and it fell on the pavement.

Mr Smith, coming out at the moment, saw it fall. Slowly and somewhat stiffly, but still before the nimble groom could anticipate him, he stooped and picked it up; then slightly raising his hat, presented it, seal uppermost, to the lady in the carriage.

Lady Sauffrenden felt a faint sensation of surprise. There was nothing in the action, of course, but there was something in the manner of performing it, which was not that of a vulgar man; and a vulgar man she had predetermined the new proprietor to be.

She had to pass the house on the Hill every time she drove into the village, and when she heard that it was being built by a Mr Smith, and that Mr Smith himself was coming to live in it, she thought she knew exactly the sort of person he would be. A short, stout, grey man, and vulgar.

Then she saw him face to face, and he answered to the portrait precisely, except — no, not vulgar, odd.

After the affair of the letter, she never called him vulgar.

Others saw the incident, but it caused no change in their opinions. It by no means altered Mrs Hunt's, for instance. Mr Smith looked none the younger when he stooped down, and his age was her only objection to him. The butcher recommenced his grumbling. What was a Mr Smith to him? He didn't want no Mr Smiths. Mr Smith, indeed! Why, the very name Smith had a regular family sound.

A Mrs Smith, a young Smith, the Miss Smiths, Bobby Smith, Jack Smith, Joe Smith, the Smith's baby, and the Smith's governess, seemed to him only the proper Smith connection.

Then the grocer and the baker recurred afresh to their ideal, a Mr Smith of servants. Children they set little store by, except as they gave rise to servants.

Harrop lamented anew the Mr Smith of his imagination, a mixture of the stable and the cellar; and Jessamy took up his sponges with a sigh, and strove to efface from his memory the lost anticipations of waxed mustachios and scented pocket-handkerchiefs.

Dr Hunt met Mr Smith, and but that his house of cards had long before this tumbled in the dust, it would have done so on the spot.

Here was the man whom he had been looking to as the embodiment of human ailments! The Mr Smith of measles, whooping-cough, and chicken-pox; winter sore throats, and summer chills; a Mr Smith of accidents it might be; best of all, an increasing Mr Smith. The family so ardently desired by the villagers he would have been proud to present to them.

There was the man, and where was such a prospect? Tough as leather, and as unimpressible. He would neither prove a patient himself, nor take to him one who would. A place like that, too! Why, the practice of that house on the Hill ought to have been a cool hundred a-year in his pocket. Pish!

There Mr Smith was, however, be he what he might, or who he might, living in Mr Smith's house, and receiving Mr Smith's letters. There was no doubt that it was himself. If there had been the faintest shadow of a doubt, not one, but one and all, would have been glad to raise it.

There he was, think what they all might, say what they all could.

They did not want him there, but they could not turn him out. He had built his house, and he meant to come and live in it. Why he had built the house they could all understand. Was it not their own neighbourhood, and had it its equal for advantages in England? The estate had always been a fine one; it only needed a mansion-house.

And the village, or the town, as it had grown to be, was so conveniently near; and was within an hour and a half of London by train; and it had two daily posts and a telegraph office; a railway station, livery stables, and nursery gardens.

It was no wonder that Mr Smith should think of building the house on the Hill; but having done so, they were unreasonably ill-pleased that he should wish to come and live in it.

People said he had lived abroad. Well, why could he not have gone on living there? Others would have made the property as good a speculation for themselves, and a deal better for them as had lived there before.

One thing, however, told in favour of the new-

comer. He was rich. He had not met their expectations in any other way, but he had not failed in this. He really and truly was rich. His fortune was there. It had not melted, as money usually does, when too curiously pried into.

The amount, indeed, had been difficult to settle. At first it was thirty, but it passed through the different gradations of twenty-five, and twenty, to ten thousand a-year.

His servants deponed to its being ten. Several of them had heard Mr Smith say so.

Upon investigation, it proved to have been, not Mr Smith who said so, but his lawyer. The lawyer's phrase was, "A man like you with ten thousand a-year." And this, of course, as lawyer's evidence, was even more conclusive than if it had been given by their master himself.

The money was therefore secure, and they must make what they could out of it. It at least had not cheated them. They bowed low to the fortune. Although it had been reported at thirty, it was held to have stood the test well, when proved to be ten.

CHAPTER II.

WHO WAS TO BE THE FIRST?

THE next point was, who was to call on Mr Smith?

Public expectation pointed first to the rector. But the rector, between his sore throats, his daily services, and his confidence that the new-comer would prove an orthodox parishioner, since he had cushioned and carpeted a church pew for his own particular use, was slow to fulfil the requirements of society in the present instance.

Mr Grey was a slow, but by no means a sure man to trust to. On ordinary occasions nothing else was expected from him. But then this was not quite an ordinary case. An immense amount of curiosity, conjecture, and anticipatory excitement had already been spent on the new proprietor, and it would be hard if all this outlay were to yield no return.

The sickle was therefore respectfully put into the

rector's hand, and he was dumbly requested to lead the way and reap the first-fruits.

For a while he stood still with the sickle in the hand. The house on the Hill was a noble building. When he saw it first beginning to rise, a little of the parish ferment had worked itself even into his pre-occupied bosom. He felt a seething of surmise as to its owner, and a bubble of anxiety lest he should prove schismatic.

But Mr Smith spoilt all.

Before he himself appeared, the church pew was applied for; and when the furniture for the house came down, the carpet and cushions for the pew came down with it.

Mr Grey felt secure, and turned him over to the curate. The curate was finishing his fortnight in Wales, and to wait for him was impossible.

The eyes of the population were therefore turned to the doctor, and if Mrs Hunt had had her way, they would have been speedily gratified.

But Mrs Hunt, who had her way, if report spoke truly, on a great many points where perhaps it might have been as well if she had not, knew that there were parts of her dominion into which even

the sovereign was sometimes refused admittance. She thought, she fancied this would be the case in the present instance; but she was brave, and she determined to risk it.

At once the doctor showed his bristles. "Call on Mr Smith, Polly? Not I. No one has called yet."

"It is so soon," suggested she.

"Soon? Of course it is. Ridiculously soon! The man hasn't been here two days. Until I have met him out, or until some reasonable time has elapsed, I shall let him alone. March up there to-day? No, no, you'll not catch Robert Hunt making such a fool of himself."

"Oh dear, doctor, where's the fool? You ought to call as the doctor, if not as a neighbour. Think if that Barton should get him!"

The doctor turned round savagely.

"Call as the doctor? I'd sooner call as the—— What do you mean by such nonsense?" cried he, pulling up with a choke. "Haven't I told you times without number that I'm not going to tout for business like a railway porter, or a cabman? If I want Mr Smith I shall call as a neighbour; if he doesn't like me as a neighbour, he needn't return it."

"I daresay he'll be among all the county people?" hinted she.

"I daresay he'll be nothing of the sort."

"Oh, you may depend upon it, he will, my dear, with a place like that. What is to prevent him?"

"The very fact of his having that place. What brought him here? Nobody knows. Where does he come from? Nobody knows. People won't be so keen to call as you think, I can tell you."

"Well, I saw him speaking to Lady Sauffrenden yesterday, at all events."

"Hang Lady Sauffrenden!"

"Never mind Lady Sauffrenden, doctor; the point is Mr Smith."

"What do you want with Mr Smith?"

"Only to be neighbourly, I'm sure, and—have him here sometimes, you know. With neither wife, nor sister, nor any one belonging to him, he must be often dull of an evening, and would like to come down now and then, I daresay. The girls would amuse him."

"So that's what you're after, Polly. Why, the man's as old as I am."

Having recovered from the first shock of this sus-

picion herself, it behoved her, if she could not dissipate the suspicion, at least to soften the shock, to her husband.

"That's not so old either, Robert. He's a fine-looking man, and a bachelor's always younger than other men."

"I don't see that. I think I'm as young-looking as Smith any day. Stout, apoplectic——"

"Oh dear, doctor, don't go and speak against him —you might just as well give him a chance. What's a few years more or less? And they do say he has twenty thousand a-year."

"No, Polly, it's ten. It has come down to ten since he arrived. However, ten would be enough for me. Humph!"

"So you see you might just as well call as other people," nodded his wife, knowingly.

"If I call now, ma'am, can't you see that it means a doctor's call—a village doctor in search of patients? Do you think that that's a likely way to bring Mr Smith forward as a suitor for your daughter?" cried he, with no subterfuge of language. "I know the world a little better than you do, Mrs Hunt; it's only those who have something to get by it who rush at

every new man. I'll take care Smith doesn't go past me, but I don't mean him to find that out. I'm not going to be known as the village doctor to anybody. What is the use of your fine connections if that is the only footing we have to stand upon? If I had not taken the greatest care in the world we should never have been where we are now. It is not everybody in our position who has the footing we have. Scarcely a house in the neighbourhood we don't go to, once a-year at least. I mean to call on this Mr Smith, of course; but I shall wait a little, till some of the other people have been. Then I call as a neighbour, among the other neighbours. Then you may try to hook him, if you can."

"I'm afraid the girls will laugh at him."

"What is there to laugh at?"

"I'm sure I don't know, but they are always quizzing people, as they call it. They'll say he's a regular old quiz."

"They'll be great fools, then."

"It's the Tolleton girls that set them on."

"The Tolleton girls would be glad to catch Mr Smith for one of themselves."

"That they would, Robert! That's what I say.

Old Tolleton will be going and calling there to-day, —see if he doesn't!"

"I met him coming out of the gate just now," said the doctor, with a grin.

"There now! Didn't I tell you? They'll have asked him to dinner as sure as eggs are eggs, and he'll be there all day long!"

"You needn't put yourself about, for they haven't done it yet, Polly. Mrs Tolleton, the old lady, is just dead, and he was telling me how they couldn't have any company just now on that account, but he had been up to call. However, Smith was out."

"As if they couldn't have waited to call, and his own mother barely buried!" cried Mrs Hunt. "The way some people will rush at everybody they think a catch, in the very face of decency!"

"It is just what you wanted me to do."

"No, indeed, doctor; there's all the difference in the world. Your mother has been dead these twenty years; there's no reason in the world why you shouldn't call at once."

"There's no reason why I should, and that's more to the purpose. Who thinks anything of Tolleton, just because he's always thrusting his card upon

everybody? And if I did the same they would think still less of me. The Tolletons are a cut above us. You be patient, Polly, and I'll do the right thing at the right time."

Mrs Hunt drummed her feet upon the floor. It was hard to be patient, when a few minutes before she had seemed so nearly victorious. When, too, he had not been blind to her wishes, but had understood and plainly spoken them out, yet had not, as many an unreasonable husband would have done, forbidden her to carry them into effect.

The Tolletons, if they had an end in view, generally managed to attain it, in spite of deaths, and other inconveniences. Mr Smith would be there at dinner ere long,—would perhaps be intimate at Freelands before the Hunts even knew him.

The girls might laugh at Mr Smith, and call him an old quiz, as she had predicted, but that was no reason why, as the doctor had rejoined, they would not be glad enough to catch him if they could.

The worst of it was, that Maria and Clare, who always did whatever the Tolleton girls did, would laugh with them at Mr Smith, and call him an old quiz likewise, but would never be able to detect if

the other prophecy also came true, and the Miss Tolletons had a serious aim beneath their pleasantry.

She was already certain that such was, or would be, the case.

If not, why had Mr Tolleton been the first to call? He always was the first to call on everybody, it was true, but it was his daughters who egged him on to it. The way those girls did manage to scratch up acquaintance with people by hook or by crook, really was disgraceful. Anybody could get good society if they chose to buffet their way into it, as they did.

There was Helen, when the autumn manœuvres were going on, driving about the heath all day long. Tea at the camp—picnics—luncheon parties at the Tolletons' every day of the week; and old Tolleton calling here and calling there, and fairly begging the young men to come and drink his wine, and eat his mutton.

Mrs Hunt did not reflect that the young men were very easy to be entreated.

The wine and the mutton may have had some share in attracting them, but undoubtedly the Miss Tolletons had still more.

They were generally spoken of as handsome and

good fun; but it was shrewdly suspected that among the younger men there were not a few who, covering with such light praise the name of Helen Tolleton, went away smarting with a hidden wound.

Helen's pale face did infinitely greater damage than the more blooming countenances of her sisters. Why she was so pale, no one could imagine. She was well, she was strong, she was if anything the healthiest of the three. Exercise or excitement would bring the colour to her cheek at once; but when under the influence of neither she was pale, decidedly pale, and her cheek as well as her forehead had a soft creamy tint.

Carry and Lily thought that they excelled their sister in complexion, but they were ready to acknowledge her superiority in feature. Her blue eyes, with their long black lashes, were esteemed by the others her best point, although with careless approbation they were ready to acknowledge the symmetry of the small high nose, and the exquisite dip in the upper lip.

They were proud of Helen's beauty, and frankly repeated her compliments, but there was one thing they did not like her to be called, and that was "delicate." Her beauty was genuine, and they had no

thought of jealousy on that point, but her delicacy was a deception. She had neither Carry's headaches, nor Lily's twinges of rheumatism, and yet she added this refined touch to her other fascinations.

Helen was the one who made acquaintances for the family.

It was she who went out walking before breakfast, and met people by accident. She who brought in strangers to see papa's collection of curiosities. Her photograph-book was the show one; and the photographs contained therein were so many, and so frequently altered, that her sisters were often puzzled to account for new phenomena.

All three made button-hole bouquets in perfection, but Helen expected the first pick of the flowers. The first pick of partners for croquet was hers also; and whenever any unexceptionable young chrysalis of a husband appeared on the horizon, it was understood that Helen would be the proper wife for him.

If these privileges, however, were conceded by the younger Miss Tolletons with ready grace, they in their turn exacted demands from other young ladies.

It is not every family who possesses a distinguished

beauty; and Carry and Lily felt that they might themselves have reigned as suns in lesser spheres.

Had either of them been born in the doctor's family, for example, she would have been the centre of attraction. As it was, the doctor's daughters paid due homage; and it was no more than true what Mrs Hunt alleged, that whatever the Tolleton girls did, hers would do.

She had been, she still was, proud of the Tolletons' friendship. She frequently boasted of her intimacy at Freelands. She never refused an invitation to the house, and she went there a great many times without any invitation at all; but then, you know, she thought all that was one thing, and to love one's neighbour as one's self was another.

"Those Tolleton girls are doing ours no good," was a frequent remark in her mouth; but when it came to particulars, she had nothing more to say. She had that ineffective way of inveighing against things wholesale, which is at once so disagreeable and so incontrovertible. She was always complaining, but never suggested a remedy. "I suppose they have been again with those Tolleton girls?" she would say, if hers were out late. "Which of the Tolleton

girls did you get that thing from?" if it did not please her. Both remarks being uttered in a disparaging tone, but no definite disapprobation expressed. In consequence, Maria and Clare went on just as they had done before. It was mamma's way, and meant nothing.

They dearly loved the society of the Miss Tolletons. Their mother thought that from it they got no good, but widely different was their own opinion. They learnt, they imagined, everything from these dear friends.

Thus in their dress. Now the Miss Tolletons having fine tall well-moulded figures, and inclinations rather of the dashing than the gentle sort, affected something of a masculine style.

They wore rough tight-fitting jackets with large buttons, high plumy hats, and all sorts of belts and buckles round their waists.

Whether it were to be admired or not, the style was not one to be universally imitated. Least of all should Maria and Clare Hunt have presumed to copy.

They had no beauties of face or figure, and only soft fabrics and delicately blended colours could, at the best, have made them look neat and lady-like.

This did not meet their views at all. They wished to look trim, and bright, and sparkling, like Helen Tolleton, who always wore a background of black to set off her pale face, and to whom the addition of a scarlet or rose-coloured shawl was like paint.

Accordingly the Hunts wore black and rose-colour likewise.

They saved up their money and got sashes of the same brilliant hue. They sewed buckles on their shoes, and wore in winter furry things about their wrists and ancles.

Thus they appeared, in their own eyes, faithful copies of perfect models, but it is to be feared in the eyes of impartial spectators, a pair of extraordinarily ill-dressed and ill-looking young women.

See, Maria is just come in from her walk with these chosen companions. Her mother knows she has been with them, and is generally dissatisfied. She looks her over, and begins to peck.

"I don't like that jacket, Maria; it doesn't set well."

"Oh, mamma, I thought Miss Platt had made it so beautifully."

"No, she hasn't, or else it's the material. I can't

tell which it is, but it makes you look as thick again. It may be the trimming, perhaps. I don't like its being open at the neck, either."

"Lily Tolleton says they are all being worn open at the neck now; no one ever thinks of wearing them shut."

"You'll catch your death of cold," grunts the doctor, who has not yet gone out after his conversation with his wife about Mr Smith.

"No, papa, I'm quite warm," beginning to cough at the same moment.

"Why, you have a cold already, child."

"I had that before I went out, papa. I felt it this morning when I awoke, indeed I did."

"All the more absurd to expose your throat in a cold wind. I never heard of such a thing! Now, look here, you'll have a mustard blister on to-night, all over the place; keep it on some time too, and close up that jacket before you wear it again. Do you hear? Now mind you do as I tell you. I'm not going to have my daughters lose their health for all the Lily Tolletons and fashion-books in existence."

"I can put on the blister, papa, although it is

really hardly worth it, my cold is so little; but a nice warm necktie would be far better than closing up the jacket, it would spoil the whole shape," pleads poor Maria, who with a little more cunning would have said no more.

"Spoil it then; it's a mad shape."

"I can't do it, papa; I don't know how. I don't believe it can be done. Mamma, will you tell him it can't be done?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I don't like it myself. I don't see what is to be done to it, I'm sure."

"I'm sure it looks very nice." (Maria, injured and unbelieving.) "I meant it to be my best all winter, and now you're all against it. It's very hard."

"Here, let me see; perhaps I can make it better," replies her mother, pulling open the offending garment, and beginning to push and tug it about. "Give me a pin; I daresay it could be brought together."

"I don't want it brought together; I like it far better open. Do leave it alone, mamma."

"You won't have it open. You may either wear it close or not at all, Maria, so take your choice."

The doctor delivers his verdict, and stamps out of the room.

Maria has the tears in her eyes.

"It's too bad. Why did you begin about it, mamma? You might have known it would have set papa off. He always complains of everything I wear."

"I'm doing all I can for you; I wish you would stand still," replies Mrs Hunt, still uncomfortably tugging and pushing the jacket. "I don't know what's the matter with it, I'm sure. It won't look well any way."

"What *is* the matter with it, mamma? You keep saying it doesn't look well, and it doesn't look well, and you won't tell me where the fault is."

"It's just altogether, I think. It's too big for you, and too thick. Somehow you look all of a bunch."

Maria twists herself out of her mother's hands.

"I do *not* look all of a bunch, mamma; and I wish you wouldn't be so disagreeable. Why don't you go on at Clare about hers?"

"I'm sure I do; I'm always speaking to you both, but it's of no use. Neither of you ever care for anything I say. Where is Clare now?"

With the Tolletons, of course. Clare had gone

down the street hanging anxiously on Lily Tolleton's rear, who, in her good-nature, had promised her a sight of Mr Smith. Maria confesses the fact, well aware of what will follow.

"Humph! What does she go with the Tolletons for? And where was Mr Smith?"

Mr Smith had been seen at the station, and the fortunate spectators had not been selfish, but had desired to extend the privilege to their less happy acquaintance.

Such was the substance of Maria's information; and Mrs Hunt humphs again as she hears it.

"What did they say of Mr Smith?"

"Oh, they were laughing so about him. They say he's a sort of old-young man—neither one thing nor the other—the funniest combination."

"I knew they would! Just like them! And now they'll be setting their caps at him as hard as ever they can!"

"At *him!* Goodness, mamma, they say he is as old as the hills! That was the fun of it."

"He's nothing of the sort, then; he's not so old as your father, who was fifty last March. He can't be far on in the forties yet; and that's nothing when

there's twenty thousand a-year. Take my word for it, Helen Tolleton will have a try for that twenty thousand."

"Helen was the very one who joked about him, and Miss Bain. She said he was the very husband for Miss Bain."

"I knew it!" exclaims Mrs Hunt, bitterly; "I said that was just what she would do. Get you and your sister to laugh at him and snub him, and then go and make up to him herself! Do you know those girls set their father on to call to-day?"

"They said he thought he ought to call."

"He think! he never thinks anything but what they bid him," retorts the unsparing tongue. "That is what they did, I can tell you; and his mother just laid in her grave."

"Mr Smith's mother!"

"And why not, pray? Why should Mr Smith not have a mother as well as other people? But it was the Tolletons I meant; and Mr Tolleton is many a year older than Mr Smith, I imagine. I suppose you think, because he dyes his whiskers, and wears a wig, and pinches in his feet, that he is quite a young man!"

"He's a very nice man, mamma. I didn't suppose he could be exactly young; though he always says nobody will believe that he can have three grown-up daughters. But I don't believe he wears a wig."

"It's the most barefaced wig I ever saw in my life. It doesn't even come properly down to the back of his neck. But any one of the Tolletons can take you in."

"There were such a number of boxes for Mr Smith at the station." Maria prudently changes the subject. "Do you know, mamma, he has a picture-gallery, and the Tolletons say it would make the most splendid ball-room. They are going to get him to give a ball in it."

"The impudence of those girls!" exclaims Mrs Hunt, throwing back her cap-strings, and reddening with wrath. "*They* get him to give a ball! I'd like to hear them ask it. What business have they with him, or he with them, I should like to know? Common decency might have prevented them thinking of such a thing—just now, at all events, with their poor grandmother——"

"Oh, that was what they said, mamma. They said

it must not be just yet, because of old Mrs Tolleton——"

"And what has old Mrs Tolleton to do with Mr Smith?"

"Why, you were saying this very moment, mamma, how could they get him to give a ball when old Mrs Tolleton——"

"Maria, you are the stupidest girl! What business have the Tolletons to ask Mr Smith about a ball, or about anything else? It's not one thing more than another! What have they to do with him at all? *That's* what I mean. Laying siege to him in this way; and actually taking possession of the man before they have ever met him!"

"They have met him; Helen met him yesterday."

Mrs Hunt, fairly gasping—"You don't say it; she never has, surely! Well, that beats all! I would hardly have believed that, even of Helen Tolleton!"

"What in the world do you mean, mamma? How could Helen help it? She was out riding past his gate, and dropped her whip just as he came out; so of course he picked it up for her, and they got to talk."

"Oh, of course." Very bitter is this rejoinder. "And of course she is in the habit of dropping her

whip; and of course she laughed at him, and called him old and fat and ugly; and if she can manage to be Mrs Smith before the year is out, she will."

"Well, I've seen Mr Smith!" cries a fresh voice in the doorway. "He's not so bad after all, I can tell you. And fancy, mamma, he had such a grand footman!"

"Quite right, too, in a house like that. Most people would have a butler."

"I don't know that he hasn't a butler; but it was a footman at the station. I didn't know that he would come out in that style."

"What style did you expect? All the people round about have men-servants.

"But I didn't know he was going to be one of them; I thought he would be one of us."

"I hope there is no such great difference," says Mrs Hunt, with an air caught from her husband.

"Well, we have only a maid; and you know what I mean, mamma. People always seemed to think Mr Smith would belong to the village. I don't believe he will now. Nobody would, who could go on as he is going."

"Don't get vulgar notions, Clare. I've always warned you against that."

"But you haven't heard me out, mamma. The horses are to come next week; and there are going to be such a lot of greenhouses; and another avenue along the low valley; and a boathouse, and a fountain, or grotto, or something, by the river. Oh, and the out-door bell! that huge thing was the bell, Maria."

All this is mingled sweet and bitter to Mrs Hunt. It is delightful to see how much higher Mr Smith is held in Clare's estimation than in Maria's. Clare has not said one word in disparagement of Mr Smith, and is excited and interested about him. She has not repeated a single condemnatory clause of the Tolletons. She is alive to the greatness of the subject.

But then, what will become of all this most becoming eagerness, if it is permitted to grow cold and die out for want of putting fuel on the fire? What is the use of her caring at all about Mr Smith, if the Tolleton girls are caring likewise, and have got the start of her? The glories of the Hill had dazzled Clare, and so far well; but she almost wished that they had not been so obvious, that they might

have had a chance of escaping the Tolletons' eyes.

The doctor was really too provoking in his pride and nonsense. Many a good thing he had lost, she was sure, from holding his head too high. She was always telling him so; but it did no good. And now she must wait, wait, while the Tolletons step into the healing pool before her very eyes.

Thus mortifying were her reflections.

Dr Hunt had argued the point with her many and many a time.

He had right on his side, and he argued strongly. With the Tolletons pushing might succeed; but it would not with him. Witness that affair of the Sauffrendens. Lord Sauffrenden never by any chance passed him by, but would stop to chat, and turn round and walk by his side in the most friendly manner possible; whereas he looked the other way if there were any Tolletons coming. Now, why is this? Dr Hunt knows full well. He never called at the Castle when the bride and bridegroom arrived from their wedding journey. He never received, in reply, an envelope containing frigid cards, delivered by a footman. He took care when he was

sent for to Sauffrenden to go promptly, and retire swiftly.

And what is the consequence ?

The Tolletons having talked of the Sauffrendens' coming, and of calling on the Sauffrendens, and of the Sauffrendens' society, and entertainments in prospect, could not so suddenly sink into absolute silence on the subject, without that silence having in it something ominous.

Everybody at once knew how it had been.

It had not perhaps been exactly forward in the Tolletons to make some advances ; but they should have done it more cautiously. They had visited at the Castle in old times, whilst these three sprightly girls were still in the nursery ; and the family had, somehow or other, been held in higher estimation than they were now. Perhaps they were justified in supposing the old relations were to be maintained. Who was to carry to their ears the description given to the charming, severe, autocratic young bride ? How were they to know she would toss her little head on seeing their cards on her hall-table ? Or how imagine she would be so particular and stupid about girls' ways ?

The rebuff astonished and confounded them ; and Dr Hunt, who had found out about it, thanked his stars it had not been given to him.

He struggled to put himself on a level with the Tolletons, and the Tolletons could not keep their own. They allowed him to obtain a footing on sufferance.

CHAPTER III.

A DRIVE IN THE DUSK.

Mr Tolleton had a simple and not uncommon method of estimating the merits of his fellow-men. He measured them precisely in accordance with the measure they took of him.

Astronomically speaking, as soon as a foreign body made its appearance upon the horizon of his firmament, he rushed at it, and if received with a corresponding degree of warmth, if permitted to rank himself among its satellites, his desires were satisfied, and he would placidly revolve around it in an orbit more or less extensive.

If, on the other hand, a repellent force threw him off, and he found himself fed with neither light nor heat, he would rebound with a violent explosion.

It is but due to him to state that he consciously exercised no repellent force in his own person. He

was willing, nay, he was anxious, to be friends with everybody; and when with the utmost alacrity he prepared for a new friendship, if he were not met at least a quarter of the way, he felt reasonably astonished and aggrieved.

As soon as tidings had reached him of a new proprietor coming to the Hill, he had set his face steadily in that direction, waiting for the new appearance, and therefore it was hardly true in Mrs Hunt to affirm that he would never have called had it not been for his daughters. The very length of time during which he had been anticipating this visit, had served to inflate his mind with eager expectations; and it was these even more than Helen's hints which propelled him, with what might possibly appear a little unseemly haste, into the arms of the new-comer.

After all, however, he was not the first.

Captain Wellwood had been before him. Captain Wellwood had walked up to the Hill just half an hour before him; but neither he nor Mr Tolleton had found Mr Smith at home.

Captain Philip Montgomery Wellwood, who thought a good deal of himself, and was of opinion

that he had been thought a good deal of in the Blues two or three years ago, was rather surprised at having to go and call on a Mr Smith.

It was not his own idea to do so. In fact he would never have thought of such a thing if it had not been for Lord Sauffrenden.

It had been one of the favours Lord Sauffrenden was perpetually asking. If he did you a good turn one day, he would as cheerfully ask you to do him one the next. He had no objection to be under an obligation; if anything, he liked it. Perhaps he realised the truth that the blessedness of giving may sometimes consist in the gift of that rare blessedness to another.

With Philip Wellwood, however, his own old comrade, his chosen companion still, his one familiar friend, it was not a system of give and take. What Sauffrenden willed Philip would do, what Philip willed Sauffrenden would anticipate.

The latter was now in town, and the request had been conveyed in a letter to his wife—the same letter, in fact, which Mr Smith had picked up at the post-office door, and handed to her as she sat in the pony-carriage.

The letter was very much the same as those she usually received from her husband. Very badly written, very little in it; but as true, and frank, and hearty as the writer was himself.

It was a disappointing one nevertheless. She had hoped it would name the day of his return, and instead of this it intimated that he was to be yet longer absent. The business which took him to town was still undecided, he was awfully sorry, it was a dreadful bore, and he was dearest Milly's most loving S.

Then came a postscript. "If Mr Smith has come to his house yet, will you ask Philip to call. Ask him from me. The Lorrimers know Smith, and they say he is one of the best fellows in the world."

One of the best fellows in the world! If it had been Sauffrenden himself who said so—he knew many of that description—but the Lorrimers!

Sir George Lorrimer was as unlikely to pass such a verdict as her husband was likely to do so. He was a man whom it was difficult to please, and one whom she herself considered well worth pleasing. If it were true that he had bestowed such an eulogium, anything even that could be construed into

such, when warmed up by Sauffrenden and put into his own vocabulary, it said a great deal.

Had she owned the truth, she would hardly have supposed Sir George would have recognised the existence of such a nobody as the builder of the house on the Hill. A person of the name of Smith, and there was no more to be said about him.

It was no wonder, then, that Lady Sauffrenden was surprised.

She thought over Mr Smith, and could not think of anything against him. He was a quiet-looking man. He was unobjectionable. He was probably unobtrusive. In fact he was undistinguishable in any way. She would not have thought of him twice but for that postscript.

If Captain Wellwood were asked by her husband to call, of course it must mean that he himself intended to do the same. And then Mr Smith must be asked to Sauffrenden.

And then she must know him.

Would it not be rather unfortunate? Was it not putting him a little out of his place? Could he be at home among their people?

Relief, however, was at hand. He was at home

apparently with Sir George Lorrimer, and that was enough.

All this passed through Lady Sauffrenden's mind as she trotted her ponies home from the village, and fortunately she had gone some distance before she met Captain Wellwood. A more immediate meeting would not have allowed her to deliver her message with so good a grace as she now did.

If Philip felt any of the surprise, on hearing the message, which Lady Sauffrenden did on reading it, at least he showed none.

"I must go to-morrow, then," he said, "as I leave next day for Ireland. I shall walk over to-morrow, Lady Sauffrenden."

"Pray, don't trouble yourself, if you are going away so soon. Sauffrenden would never expect it. Any time will do."

"No trouble in the world, and I shall be away some weeks, so I had better go at once. I am going over in hopes of a little cocking—that is, woodcock-shooting."

"I know what cocking is, and I wish you good sport, but don't tease yourself about Mr Smith.

He only arrived yesterday, so it cannot possibly matter."

Captain Wellwood was THE young man of the neighbourhood.

He had once been the hope of Helen Tolleton—her confident, comfortable hope. Then he changed into her anxiety. Finally into her despair.

When he left the army two years before, he was her hope. He was so handsome—which was hardly correct, as he was rather plain; so distinguished-looking—which was nearer the truth, on account of his height; so well born—a fact; so rich—a lie; that Helen declared she had lost her heart to him.

She had said this at least half-a-dozen times before the possibility occurred to her of Captain Wellwood not finding, or at all events not picking up, the lost possession.

It took some time to realise that such a thing might be.

He came to the house, played croquet, shot pheasants, talked, laughed, and admired, and then —stopped short just where he ought to have gone forward.

He did not indeed do those things which he

ought not to have done, but he left undone those which he ought to have done.

It was inexplicable, and he became her anxiety. What could be the drawback? Every art was tried—and, alas! she knew them all—but unsuccessfully. And then, somehow or other, whatever the cure was, ill-natured people would have said that it was the discovery that instead of being rich, he was rather poor; but with that we have nothing to do—be the cure what it might, it came, and was a perfect one.

Her anxiety died out, and he faded quite calmly into her despair. "He was a melancholy-minded man," she said, "who would never marry." And that settled the question.

Mr Smith had once or twice met Captain Wellwood, before finding his card on his hall-table. He had come down in the train with him from London, and they had afterward passed each other in a doorway, and had crossed and recrossed in the village. He knew very well who he was, and thought it very kind both in him and Mr Tolleton to come to the Hill so soon.

Mr Tolleton he did not know by sight, but as he placed the cards on the drawing-room card-tray, something in the name seemed to strike him.

A moment after his eye brightened—he had caught the clue.

"It must be her father. Now I know what puzzled my thick old head. A good thing I remembered, too. One can't be particular enough in these matters."

He had been called Brown once or twice in his life, and it had hurt him. He would not himself hurt the feelings of man, woman, or child, for the world.

Lord Sauffrenden's card was not long in following the others. He was at home before the end of the week, and the day after his return, found his way to the Hill.

The visit was a pleasant surprise. The Lorrimers had spoken to Mr Smith about the Sauffrendens, but he had not supposed that they would speak to the Sauffrendens about him. There was no reason, he told himself, why Lord Sauffrenden should seek his acquaintance. He did not suppose he would trouble himself about it. It was

really too kind to call the very day after his return from London.

For of course Mr Smith knew he had been in London, and knew exactly the time of his return. We all do know these things, unless we are purblinded by want of sympathy and self-absorption. He knew all about it, and felt a little justifiable pride as he carried the card to the tray—but he pushed it underneath the others.

Ah! if that card had not been fresh and new, but had been dirty and old, and deposited months before, there are many card-trays on which it would have found its way to the top, nevertheless; but not in that house.

It was with agreeable anticipations that Mr Smith prepared for returning his visitor's civility.

The walk in itself would be delightful that lovely autumn day, and he was preparing to walk when a thought occurred to him. Suppose he met Lord or Lady Sauffrenden in the grounds. Suppose they did not know who he was, and took him for an intruder. Suppose—— He rang the bell, and ordered the carriage; he could not face the idea of such probabilities. Lord Sauffrenden might

walk to call upon him, but he, plain John Smith, had better drive to call on Lady Sauffrenden.

There was something in the little homely man's entrance which struck the lady of the house as she rose to receive him.

She had called him vulgar-looking in that momentary glance at the post-office door, and immediately after had cancelled the expression, and substituted odd. But he had not been sitting there many minutes before she discovered that there was nothing odd about him. He did everything that other people did, and did it singularly well. He was, strange to say, a gentleman.

Lord Sauffrenden looked more than once at his wife with an "I told you so" in his look. She had not been so ready as he thought she ought to have been in believing that Mr Smith was one of the best fellows in the world. The Lorrimers' authority had gone far, but in her heart she believed it had been stretched to its utmost limits. Sauffrenden had declined to drive with her the day after he came home, because he wished to call on Mr Smith. It was really rather absurd. As if he could not have waited a day! And she had been cross, and

gone back to her former opinion of Mr Smith; and if she had had a moment to think, she might have put on her frigid air when he was announced at Sauffrenden.

But she had been obliged to meet him with politeness, and insensibly politeness slid into cordiality.

What a triumph for her husband! He would have made friends with every one, had he followed the dictates of his heart, and when a man came recommended by a friend! He must show him his kennels, his canoe, his photographic apparatus. He must show him the tree that was struck by lightning. Would he take a turn now? Then, to his surprise, his wife rose, saying she would get her hat, and accompany them.

It was not often she honoured a guest thus, for to tell the truth at once, Lady Sauffrenden had the reputation in the county of being a very haughty and disagreeable young madam.

But then Lady Sauffrenden did not consider herself blest in her county neighbours.

The few whom she liked lived far away, and those nearest to her she shuddered at the names of.

Was it altogether her fault, then, that it was only when alone with her husband, whom she loved supremely, or with the chosen few, whom she vaguely designated their "people," that the real Millicent shone out sparkling, warm, and free; and that it was no more possible for her to show herself at other times without the crust of formality and reserve, than for an oyster to tear off its shell of defence?

Her husband had no such shell, and was well beloved by all; but the few who were honoured with the friendship of the wife felt, perhaps, that it was the greater privilege.

He was hardly prepared to see her so soon bestowing that privilege upon Mr Smith. He was astonished beyond measure to hear her chattering gaily as they went along, to see her cutting a beautiful Cape jessamine for their guest's button-hole, and still more, asking from him the name of a sweet-smelling grass which her husband had seen flourishing at the Hill, and spoken to her about afterwards.

There were two plants of the grass, one on each side of the front door.

Mr Smith supplied the name, and then she wanted to know if it throve in the open air all the year round? It did, and if Lady Sauffrenden had a fancy for them, he had a number of young plants, and would be happy to send her a pair.

And there was Milly actually accepting them—a compliment indeed!

"There now!" exclaimed he, as the carriage drove off. "You see there's nothing vulgar about him."

"Vulgar!" repeated Lady Sauffrenden with animation. "He is one of the best-bred men I ever met in my life."

The day had grown rather chilly, and the carriage-rug felt warm and comfortable as Mr Smith bowled along in his carriage.

He too had been agreeably surprised with his visit. The Lorrimers, in speaking of Lady Sauffrenden, had called her stiff, and hinted that she needed to be known to be liked. They themselves thought none the less of her for this graceful buckram, which they were disposed to consider not an uncalled-for balance to her husband's pliability.

But they did not desire that it should be shown to their friend, and thinking it not unlikely that

such would be the case, they had endeavoured to prepare him. Lady Sauffrenden was stiff, but it was merely in her manner, and would wear off on acquaintance.

Lady Sauffrenden, however, had been the very reverse of stiff; she had been easy, gracious, and charming. He looked forward to her nearer acquaintance without feeling that there was anything about her which required wearing off.

Mr Smith had decided this point long before he reached the lodge gates, and as they clanged behind him, his thoughts took a different channel. For on the road in front he espied four young ladies walking. They were the Miss Tolletons, as by this time he knew, and an idea entered his mind.

The dusk was creeping on apace, and they were still two miles and rather more from their own gate. He would have his walk now, and send them on in the carriage. At that hour, at this season of the year, it was too late for girls to be walking alone so far from their own grounds. In making the offer he felt no scruples — might they not have been his daughters?

Accordingly the carriage drew up beside the

walking party; and its occupant, alighting, was warmly greeted by three of the girls, and introduced to the fourth, Maria Hunt.

The three dark beauties had the glow of health and exercise in their cheeks, and ready smiles on their lips for the proprietor of the Hill.

If he had guessed that these were the near neighbours at whose names Lady Sauffrenden shuddered!

"I am going to walk home," said he. "Can I induce anybody to make use of the empty carriage? There are seats for all, you see."

A simultaneous chorus of "Oh, thank you," and looks of indecision, responded.

Then Maria Hunt spoke. "Helen, you said you were tired when the carriage came in sight. As Mr Smith is so kind, should you——"

Helen did not look particularly grateful, and replied rather quickly—"Maria! I was only joking! Never imagining for a moment that it was *your* carriage, Mr Smith, I said I wished somebody would offer me a seat in it. Really it was no more than a jest. I can walk very well indeed. The others, perhaps, may be glad to accept your kind offer, but I shall walk."

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"But why should you walk, my dear young lady? You would not like to be separated from them."

"I could not think of turning you out like that."

"It is not turning me out, I assure you. A walk will do me all the good in the world, for I have had no proper one to day. Let me put you in," he urged.

"No, indeed." Helen was resolute.

"Or perhaps Mr Smith will join us in our walk," suggested Carry.

"And then Helen could drive," put in Maria Hunt again.

Helen again did not look grateful, but the next moment her brow cleared, and she answered gently —"I will drive, since Mr Smith is so very kind, but only on one condition, that he does the same. Ah," she continued, turning to him with an arch smile, "you cannot say now you would *prefer* to walk, after a request like this."

No, of course he could not say so, but it was rather embarrassing, and he did not know exactly what to say instead. He looked at Helen, looked at the others, and wondered what was expected from him.

"Perhaps Mr Smith really does prefer it," said Carry.

"He dares not say so, if he does," said Helen, turning her eyes upon him full of laughter and defiance. "Yes, Mr Smith, I am tired, very tired, and have had quite enough walking for to-day; but I will not get into your carriage on any other condition. Say, will you come, or not?"

He looked at her, smiled, bowed his acquiescence, and she sprang into the carriage.

"Would not another sister——" but the other sisters had walked on.

"I think," said Helen, brightly, "that *they* really do prefer it."

She had gained her point. She meant to have Mr Smith's company, and she meant to have it alone. The means by which this end was attained she did not regard. It would be odd indeed if she could not do as she chose with a fusty old bachelor, and make him think it all right. Now, she had settled, he might as well begin to fall in love with her.

Her eyes sparkling with fun and triumph, she saw him take his seat opposite, and away they

rolled, poor Maria looking rather wistfully after them as they passed.

"Just fancy!" was Miss Tolleton's greeting when her sisters arrived home, and ere they could rally her on her successful management. "He had been at the Castle."

"At the Castle!"

"And he must have been there more than an hour, for I saw the carriage go by quite early."

"At the Castle!"

"Yes, indeed. I thought you would be surprised. Lord Sauffrenden had called on him last week, and he was returning the visit to-day."

"Did he tell you?"

"Not until I made him, and I had to be careful how I did it too. They must have been as good to him as possible, for they had taken him all over the grounds and gardens, and he seemed quite charmed."

"How very odd, isn't it?" said Lily, doubtfully. "After the way they behaved to us. What could have made them treat us so? I thought they would do the same to every one."

"Fortunately he never asked if we knew them," continued Helen; "I daresay he took it for granted.

It is really very awkward sometimes, and very tiresome. I shouldn't care half so much about it, if it weren't for what people must think."

"Never mind—let them think what they please," said Lily, rallying. "They'll think a certain lady has a little touch of the 'green-eyed monster' about her, perhaps. Now about Mr Smith, the point is, what he thinks?"

Helen laughed. "How can I tell what he thinks?"

"You can tell well enough, Nelly, when you like. Come, now—did you make the desired impression?"

"I am not vain enough to be certain of it."

"I know you are, though. You think you did wonders, or you wouldn't be in such good-humour. Well, we shall see. There's plenty of time to work him up, as artists say. It all fitted in so well—even poor Maria's blundering speeches turned to good account. But I was afraid she was going to get in herself."

"Clare would, I believe, but Maria can always be managed. You have no idea what a nice carriage it is, Lily, so delightfully hung, we seemed to be going over velvet all the time."

"I should not have disliked the drive at all," said Lily. "My boots were too tight, and I was far more tired with the walk than you. It was rather hard on me to have to like walking best."

All this time Carry looked sulky. It was all very well for Helen to appropriate the most sparkling young officers, and the most devout and dreamy curates; but of a commonplace old fogy like Mr Smith, she did think she ought to have had a fair chance. Old fogies might just as well take to her as Helen. She was not tired like Lily, and did not on that account care to have a seat in the barouche; but she would have liked a chance of making that barouche her own.

Her next speech betrayed a little of this feeling.

"I'm afraid Mr Smith must have seen that you wanted to go alone with him."

"So I did, and he was very welcome to see it."

"He wouldn't think it nice of you."

"Would he not? He ought, for it was very nice of me; most particularly nice, and kind, and complimentary. It would be very ungrateful in him to think anything else."

Helen was not to be put out of humour.

"Did you meet anybody?"

"Not a single creature. I was in hopes of meeting Mrs Hunt. I would have given anything to have seen her face."

"She'll think we're past hope now," said Lily.

"But seriously, however," said Helen, "we must take a little care with her. If she asks either of you about it, this was the way—I really was rather overdone, and would have been thankful to any one who offered to take me home. Maria won't be too communicative, will she?"

"I can hardly answer for her. You see it was rather unfortunate. But I impressed it on her how tired you really were, and how well she had done in persisting that you should drive. That was the point I pressed home most, and she was quite pleased, and proud of herself at last. The only thing I am afraid of is, that she did not quite see why no one else could have gone too. I think she would have liked to get in, dearly."

"And what had you to say to that?"

"Only that Mr Smith had never suggested it. That he had offered us the empty carriage, but that when we insisted he should not turn out him-

self, he had not pressed more than one to accompany him."

"He did, however, just as you walked off."

"Ah, but Maria never heard that. She thinks he did not want us. What fun it will be if she goes and tells her mother that!"

Helen laughed again, her excited, successful laugh. The colour was in her pale cheeks now. "It really was great fun. Poor Maria! She looked so bewildered. And now, isn't it a pity that poor grandmamma should have died just at this time? We must have Mr Smith here somehow; who knows what may come of it?"

"I don't believe anything will come of it," said Carry.

"Don't be cross, Carry; if I don't want him, you shall have the next chance. You would make a famous Mrs Smith."

"Not much of a compliment in the abstract, whatever it may be in this particular instance," said Lily. "But I want to be Mrs Smith too."

"No, you don't, Lily; you have plenty of time to wait. Carry shall have him before you, if she doesn't make herself disagreeable."

"I think he would suit Carry a great deal better than you."

"Perhaps he might, but I can't let her have him yet; I must be allowed to try my powers. He is a new sort of subject, and I'm tired of boys," says Miss Helen, saucily.

"Boys, yes; but there are degrees, gradations."

"All very well in their way, Lily, but the fact is, I have taken this into my head to do, and I mean to do it."

"You have been so idle lately, I believe this is the mischief found for your 'idle hands to do.' Go on, my friend—go on and prosper. All I want to know is, when you have obtained your victory, what will you do with it?"

"When I have obtained it, I will let you know, Lily."

"You would accept him?"

"You will see when the time comes."

More than this was not to be won from her. She nodded, and laughed, and looked brimful of audacity and mystery, but she would say no more. She was going to dress—it was quite time, the bell must have rung—and it was no use teasing her; and

then she tossed off her hat, and putting her hand to her hot cheek, sat down, and forgot where she was going to.

Carry, who glanced every now and then at her sister, could not help wondering what Mr Smith had really thought of Helen. Of course he thought her handsome, but had he been struck by her? Had he merely approved, admired her, or had he been *penetrated?*

Helen had never looked better in her life. For one thing, she always did look remarkably well in her hat. It was a dark shady felt, very high crowned, with a sable plume falling over her hair at the back. It suited her; it formed just the proper contrast to the glowing face beneath.

But would Mr Smith be alive to this? She doubted it. She doubted his susceptibility, his impressibility. Old men don't care about such things. Ten to one he would not think of Helen, and twenty to one Helen would tire of him.

CHAPTER IV.

THRUST AND PARRY.

Mr Smith, however, had thought more than once about Helen. Carry made a mistake in what she said about old men.

When papa asks some of his dear old cronies to dinner, and they come in high neckcloths and out-of-date black coats, and you girls fancy it does not much matter what you put on—the limp muslin that hangs awry, or the good gown that never did fit well, but which it would be a shame to put away—don't for a moment imagine that they do not see it.

If you have an ugly and easy way of doing up your hair, keep it for another occasion. It will pass better with young Foodle, who may take it for the new style, than with these old gentlemen. He will bear with it, perhaps even approve of it, if he

has only never seen it before; but they will wonder what in the world the child has done to herself.

No more observant spectator in the world than your silent, unimpressible-looking, innocent old gentleman.

Mr Smith, who was fifty, although Mrs Hunt denied it, could hardly be called old. He had attained his fiftieth year a few months before he came to Eastworld, and what he was capable of appreciating might therefore be still an open question.

Driving home with Helen, he had realised the fact that he was in company with a handsome woman. He had seen her delicate profile cut out against the dusky autumnal sky, and felt the fire of her laughing eyes playing upon him, with a certain sense of pleasure. He had noticed the contrast formed by the shady hat and plume, and had even gone so far as to be impressed with a vague admiration of the slender wrist, and long white fingers, which the wily maiden took off her glove to display.

The fingers were industriously engaged in twisting something wrong into right about the hair; and being

so busy, how should it ever occur to him that there was no special need of their services? Several thick gold rings, having turquoises set in them, showed off by their delicate blue the pure white skin, and he even noticed that. He thought he would never hold turquoises cheap again. On the whole, he had regarded his fair companion with a very reasonable amount of admiration.

Her tongue did not spoil her beauty. When she spoke, her voice was soft and pleasant, and she knew when to be silent.

The impression she left was favourable, and she was conscious of it.

But Mrs Hunt went up to call on the Tolletons next day.

"Mrs Hunt, wishing to know how Miss Helen is," announced Corker, generally known as the butler who drank, at Freelands.

He had come to the dining-room, where the sisters were sitting at luncheon.

"Who wishes, Corker?"

"Mrs Hunt. What am I to say, Miss?"

"Show her into the drawing-room. What is she come for now?" said Helen, as the man departed.

"It is too bad to come at luncheon-time. Can it be anything about yesterday?"

"It must," said Lily; "Maria has done it. It is well Maria is not with her; I think we can manage her alone. Get a shawl, Nelly—you may as well be a little overdone, you know; and Carry, mind what you say."

Helen rushed up-stairs, and met them in the hall, the shawl over her shoulders.

All three then went into the drawing-room, for whatever might be their internal differences, they were united in presenting a common front in time of battle, and in Mrs Hunt's presence Carry was to be relied upon.

"I came to inquire after Helen, but the man seemed quite surprised at my doing so," began the doctor's wife, as soon as she had shaken hands. "He made me repeat the question."

"Yes, I daresay, seeing her going about as usual," said Lily, looking affectionately at her sister. "You are all right to-day, aren't you, Nelly? But she was a little overdone yesterday, as perhaps Maria told you?"—to Mrs Hunt.

Mrs Hunt looked solemnly at Helen. "Maria told me she was ill."

"Oh no, not ill; not ill, or I should certainly have sent for the doctor," said Helen, sending her shaft with a sweet languid smile. "Really there was nothing to make a fuss about, thank you, Mrs Hunt; only these two would have it I had been doing too much. I am really sorry you should have taken the trouble to come all this way. It was very kind."

Mrs Hunt winced at the mention of the doctor. It suddenly occurred to her how angry her husband would have been, if he had known it could be supposed that she had come to see why he had not been summoned.

"Oh no, not the doctor. Yes, of course it's best not to make a fuss. I never do. I, in fact——" In fact, she did not know what she was saying. She had meant to find Helen in the full tide of health and spirits, and utterly discomfited by the notion of her reported illness—for although Maria had faithfully narrated the event in the light the sisters had shown it to her, and had neither exaggerated nor misinterpreted, so far as she knew, Mrs Hunt had made her own tale of it.

The fatigue was illness, that was her first improvement; and had she not taken the false step of making

her inquiries at the door, instead of waiting to put them in the drawing-room, she might certainly have gained some advantage from it.

But that mistake put the enemy up to her move. Helen came in with her shawl, looking also white and colourless, since the morning had been wet, and she had been kept to the house. It had been easy to assume a languid air, and the tables were turned.

Then came the side blow at the doctor, still further to confuse his wife.

"Well, I'm glad to see you better. You look very well, at any rate," said she, making an effort to recover herself. "And the others, too, they had a longer walk still? It was a pity no more of you took advantage of the carriage."

"Oh, we didn't mind about ourselves—we liked it!" cried Lily. "We were only so sorry afterwards that we had not made Maria get in. You see, Maria would not own that she was tired till it was too late, because she was so good; she did not like to seem forward, when Mr Smith had not expressly asked her."

"I understood he did ask her."

"Oh no, he didn't. Not so that any of us could accept the offer, at least. He offered us the whole

carriage, you know, most kindly, and wanted to jump out and walk the rest of the way himself. As if we could have allowed that! If he wanted to walk, why was he driving? So then, seeing Helen looked pale, he pressed her, and we made her go. It would have been foolish to make a fuss, you know."

This was Lily's version of the story.

Helen, with her cheek still resting on the long white fingers, in the proper attitude of one a little overdone, could not help glancing at her other sister.

But Carry was faithful. She did not confirm Lily's version; but neither by word nor look would she throw discredit on it. Helen drew a breath of relief.

"Well, really, you must have had a pleasant drive," said Mrs Hunt, turning again to her, with a little laugh.

"I was very thankful to get it," said she, mildly.

"And Mr Smith made himself very agreeable, no doubt."

"No doubt; but really I was not able to judge. Feeling disinclined to talk, his attentions rather bored me, to tell the truth."

"Dear! An old man like that! One would not have imagined his attentions could have been so very overwhelming."

Mrs Hunt gave another little laugh, not nice to hear.

"He was so very kind."

"Yes, indeed; it was so very kind of him to stop at all," chimed in Lily. "I am sure he had not even been coming our way, if he had not seen us. He said as much. He came on purpose to offer us the carriage. We had no idea he was anywhere about, for we had seen him go by that way hours before."

"And had you seen him come back?" significantly.

"Oh dear, no, Mrs Hunt; we had never looked. We had forgotten all about him."

Lily, you see, did not mind making gratuitous statements. That they were false Mrs Hunt knew, and longed to tell her so, boldly; but she could only, restrained by the decencies of polite intercourse, express her disbelief in looks, and this naturally fretted her the more.

"Maria told me"—always poor Maria, the scapegoat—"that you had several disappointments from

other carriages that seemed like his in the distance."

"Yes, Maria was disappointed. She thought it was never coming, and we told her probably it had passed long before. But she would not believe us. I can't think what she wants to see, I am sure, in the outside of the barouche."

"At any rate, that was all she did see of it."

For her life Mrs Hunt could not repress so much, though even as the words escaped her lips, she knew they were unwise.

She was fast losing ground. She was saying things she never meant to say. They seemed to be wrung out of her without her consent and against her will. She gave Lily a step at every turn, and Lily was not slow to take it.

"I am so sorry, Mrs Hunt; you seem to think we ought to have made Maria get in. I am sure I wish we had, it would have been so much pleasanter for Helen too. How could we be so stupid? I am sure I would gladly have gone myself," continued she, getting into the regions of truth at last; "for my boots were too tight, and I was tired besides; but really I did not see how to do it without appearing to intrude.'

On the whole, Mrs Hunt gained nothing by her visit. She and Lily had had a passage of arms, and Lily had come off the victor.

The facts remained the same, and she had acquired additional certainty that the Tolletons were acting up to her prediction.

On this point she pronounced emphatically, as soon as she returned home.

Maria and Clare peevishly demurred. Whatever the Tolletons did, mamma was down upon them. The Tolletons never spoke against her, as she did against them. Why could she not let them alone? Mamma went and cross-questioned them, Maria and Clare, and then made up all sorts of things they had never said, and it was very hard, and the Tolletons would think it very unkind of them.

Mamma always fancied the Tolletons meant all sorts of things they had never even thought of; and Clare even went so far as to revolt, and declare she would never tell her mother anything again, if she went making mischief in that way.

Clare, however, had threatened this before now. She and Maria had long since learnt that it was their

best policy to keep quiet about a number of things the Tolletons did.

They never saw the sinister meanings so plain to their mother's eye. They never spied out nasty motives and sneers, and things behind the scenes, as she did. In short, Mrs Hunt told them bluntly, that they could no more put two and two together than if they were blind bats and deaf adders.

They, in their turn, thought her bitterly unjust. They would fain have shielded their friends from her undeserved vituperations. They would have hidden them from her arrows.

This, however, was a vain hope. Do what they would, they could not keep the Tolletons out of their mouths. If they had an opinion to offer, it had been gained at Freelands. If there was a book to be read, a picture to be seen, a concert, a lecture, anything they wished to go to, she knew who had told them of it. It followed that she then scoffed at the Tolletons, and went to the lecture. The lecture, or whatever it was, was all very well, but those girls must be gadding about for ever. It wasn't one thing or another, but they were always finding out this and that, instead of staying at home, and minding their own business.

Up to the present time this general strain of condemnation had been all wherewith she blighted the Tolletons. She had had no specific complaint to make of them. Whatever they did she disapproved, of course; but far from carrying her disapprobation any further, she was perhaps the only mother in the neighbourhood who permitted her daughters unrestrained intercourse with the free and fast Miss Tolletons.

A new era, however, had now set in. She had grounds on which to base her disapproval. The Tolletons meant to have Mr Smith for Helen, and she meant to have him for Maria. This was, as it appeared to her, the unvarnished statement of a truth. She could not say so, of course, aloud—the latter part of the statement, at least; but it sank into her mind, and whenever she now spoke of the Tolletons, it was rarely without connecting their names with that of the new landlord at the Hill.

"Vulgar woman!" exclaimed Helen, passionately, as soon as their visitor had departed. "She got quite insolent at last. We shall have to put a stop to this. I wonder you had the patience to answer her, Lily; I am sure I couldn't."

"I think I answered her pretty well," said Lily, with modest confidence.

"Indeed you did. But it was as well, perhaps, that she had left Maria behind."

"I wouldn't be poor Maria when her mother goes home. She won't know what to make of it at all. But she really did want to see the barouche, and she will stand to that, I know."

"She would stand to anything she thought we wanted," said Helen, "so long as we could persuade her it was the truth. The worst of Maria is, you have to be so dreadfully particular with her. I am sure, to make her believe one story, I often have to tell such a number, that she ought to be held responsible for them all. But she is a good creature, and would do anything for us, if it is only pointed out to her, so that she can't mistake the way. After all, Lily, I am almost sorry we did not let her come with me yesterday. It would have saved appearances; and she is such a nonentity, you know, she would have been no more than a block of wood sitting by. The poor thing would have enjoyed it so much, I really wish we had let her."

"I had reasons for being determined," said Lily.

"I wasn't only helping your little flirtation, Miss Helen. You won't tell me what you are up to, but I suspect there may be a serious end to this, and I approve," nodding significantly; "so now I mean to give my poor assistance, and you will see I am no mean ally either."

"But what were your most sapient reasons for excluding Maria?" said Helen, laughing.

"I'll tell you. It was not so much for her interference as this. You see the Hunts don't know Mr Smith yet. Now, if he had driven Maria home, of course Dr Hunt must have called at once. The only reason he has not done it yet, is because he thinks it best to hang back at first, being the doctor. He hates to be thought professional, you know. But all the time he is dying for some excuse to take him to the Hill. I know, by the way he questioned us yesterday, and tried to find out who had been and who had not."

"How could he expect you to know?"

"I suppose he thought I could watch who went by; as if I cared to do that. Mrs Hunt would, I daresay; she is always at that bow-window of hers."

"But we can't see the road."

"Yes, we can, from our window, and he knows that well enough; for he stood looking out that day I was ill, and remarked about the Fultons' waggonette, don't you remember? That's not what I want to say, however. The thing is, to keep him as long as possible from knowing Mr Smith."

"And I can't imagine why. Do you think I'm afraid of the fair Maria's charms? What can it matter whether he knows him or not?"

"It matters because Dr Hunt never did like papa. You know how papa can't bear him; and he always takes these dislikes to people who are bad to him. He must have heard something of the sort, for he was quite ready to be friends at one time. So, if Dr Hunt goes to Mr Smith and laughs at papa, it would be a great pity, supposing, you know——" nodding again with emphasis. "Now, can't you see why it is best these two should be kept apart a little longer, if possible?"

In two things Lily was right. She was right in saying that Dr Hunt did not like her father, and also that he was very desirous of becoming acquainted with Mr Smith. He had ascertained that others, besides Mr Tolleton, had called at the Hill.

Mr Rodney, the curate, had returned from Wales, and had called immediately on his arrival. The Deanes had called. Captain Wellwood had called. More than all these, Lord Sauffrenden had called. He felt that the time had come when Dr Hunt might call.

The only drawback to his doing so now, was his wife. She never knew when to let well alone; and having seized on the definite project of her husband's going to the Hill, so chafed and worried him by her perpetual harping on the subject, that he had done as she desired, a whole day, before he would give her the satisfaction of knowing it. Mrs Hunt said it was too bad of him, but she said it with a sparkling eye. Now, indeed, she felt that she had entered the lists.

Helen Tolleton was a formidable foe, and her heart had sunk within her bosom when she left Freelands after the passage of arms before narrated. But she thought, nay, she felt sure, that during the succeeding week, at the end of which the doctor had left his card, nothing more had passed between Mr Smith and their neighbours at Freelands.

The Tolletons had not asked Mr Smith to dinner,

or if they had, he had not gone. For once in her life she inclined to the more charitable view, and believed they had not asked him. But it was hardly from charity, so much as from instinct, that she believed it. She felt uncomfortably certain that if he had been asked he would have gone. And she was right. He would have gone, with a great deal of pleasure.

But the Tolletons had not asked him, although it was now nearly three weeks since their grandmother's death. They had consulted with each other, and felt that it was better not.

Not having been at home when Mr Tolleton called, Mr Smith, it is true, knew nothing of the recent loss in their family; but it had so happened that during his drive with Helen, he had made some remarks which made her feel sure he would be particular on a point like this. She had herself led to these remarks. She wished to find out what he thought.

All through the drive, even when she was most engaged in rendering herself engaging, she was carefully studying her companion. Would he only do for a passing hour, or was it worth while to think of

the future? She was twenty-one, and tired of being Miss Tolleton. This man might suit her, and if so, everything else was all that she desired.

Now, how about her suiting him? For a short *tête-à-tête* her first appearance was sufficient. She was not vain of her looks—not one half as vain as many a one without a tithe of her beauty; but she had learnt, as she could hardly help learning, its value.

That Mr Smith should be struck at first sight—that he should be more than struck, stricken, in a sober, middle-aged, helpless sort of way—was what she expected; but she must look to her weapons if she meant to subdue him further. After her second interview, she knew that she had so far succeeded.

As they rolled along, sitting opposite to each other, she swiftly felt convinced of this. She knew that he was looking at her. She knew that when he turned his face to notice the sombre sky with its thin struggling sunset, he was furtively watching her face instead.

He was not young nor handsome, but he knew how to talk, and he knew how to look. He was not insensible, nay, he was creeping within her influence.

All this was delightful. She enjoyed it as a new sensation. She must have him. All that remained to be determined was, whether he should have her.

This was the under-current which gave a reality, a depth, to the drama. This was the doubt, the wonder, the exciting, alluring theme which absorbed her thoughts. She had not made up her mind, nor did she mean to make it up hurriedly, but she would wait and see.

Ten thousand a-year! That meant a great deal. London seasons, Continental tours, presentations, honours, and pleasures. That was what ten thousand a-year would give her, and she knew of nothing better that life could yield.

Then, on the other hand, a little plain elderly man, not insignificant, and by no means disagreeable. She thought it might do. If it came to anything. This was her feeling—a feeling between jest and earnest, which caused her to look back upon that dusky drive in the November twilight as to one of the most curiously pleasant things in her life.

CHAPTER V.

CAN'T YOU SAY *THE T's?*

When Dr Hunt had left his card at the house on the Hill, he had relieved his mind of a great weight.

Now he could talk to Mr Smith when they met one another. Now he could overtake him coming out of church, and jump into the same railway-carriage. Now he could look forward with a very sure and happy confidence to many a snug bachelor dinner in that snug bachelor dining-room, for which, even with its extra surreptitious glass of port afterwards, he would have no opposition to face from his wife. She would be ready to forward all friendly intercourse of this kind, and he, in return, would make her welcome to get Mr Smith for a son-in-law, if she could.

He saw nothing degrading to her, his daughters,

or himself, in such a proceeding. As long as his one foible was regarded, he was careless of the rest. As long as he was met on equal grounds, and was not called "doctor," he was satisfied.

It was an old offence of Lord Sauffrenden's, this calling him "doctor;" but he could pardon in Lord Sauffrenden what he could not in any other man. No one else did so. Whether Dr Hunt merely told anecdotes in which his friends called him "Hunt," or whether he more distinctly conveyed it to the minds of his auditors that so he liked to be called, matters not; his end was attained.

Mr Smith, who could not call him "Hunt" at this early period in their acquaintance, at least did not call him "doctor;" and when, in the course of conversation, he alluded to his companion as a neighbour, Dr Hunt's ambition was fully satisfied. To be regarded as a neighbour was the desire of his life. To be neighbourly included his entire creed. "And I hope you like the neighbourhood?" was invariably his third question.

To this Mr Smith had replied that, so far, he liked the neighbourhood very much indeed.

Less, indeed, it would have been difficult to say

with politeness, but his manner expressed sincerity. The neighbourhood, so far as he knew it, was peopled by Lord and Lady Sauffrenden, and the three Miss Tolletons, and he liked them all. He would have said, at all events, unhesitatingly, that he liked them all, but the truth was that he had barely exchanged half-a-dozen words with any but Helen. He had called at Freelands, of course, and they had sat demurely by while she talked, and had risen, and given him their hands politely afterwards. That was all he knew of them.

Mr Rodney he had only seen in church, the Deanes he had missed likewise, and Captain Wellwood was still away among the woodcocks.

One afternoon, however, shortly after this, he met Philip himself, just arrived by the train. Having been a little surprised at being obliged to call on Mr Smith, and having since forgotten all about him, Captain Wellwood was naturally again a little surprised at being greeted by a stranger in his native place. He remembered, however, almost instantly, who he was. They met in a lonely part of the road. The other passengers were far advanced in front, and there was a momentary awkward-

ness. Then Mr Smith raised his hat and stopped.

"I was sorry to be out when you kindly called on me, Captain Wellwood" (he had not forgotten that Captain Wellwood was the first of his new neighbours who had done so), "and to find you were from home afterwards. You have your gun-case—good sport, I hope?"

"Well, no; very bad. No frost, and no hope of it." Captain Wellwood was not in the best of humours.

"Ah, indeed; very warm here, too. Quite unseasonable."

"The hounds been doing well?"

"There was a fine run several days ago, but they didn't kill. I had the whole hunt up about my house for upwards of an hour, and then they went round by the river, and across the country beyond."

"Where did they lose him?"

"Beyond Mentonharst, but I am not certain where."

"You were not with them?"

"I'm sorry to say I don't hunt. I had not the

chance when I was young, and I hardly fancy beginning now."

"Oh, better late than never. Lots of fellows don't take to it just at first. Lord Sauffrenden's home again?"

"Yes. Don't let me keep you standing here in the cold wind. You have not been walking as I have. Good morning. I hope we may have many other——"

"Good morning. Oh yes, certainly."

What in the world had made the Sauffrendens ask him to call? Not Sauffrenden, of course; he did not wonder at him. He would make friends with every odd-come-short within a hundred miles if he could, but his wife was different. He had a great opinion of Lady Sauffrenden, partly owing, perhaps, to the fact that she, like himself, was apt to pick and choose her acquaintances. Sauffrenden would have walked arm in arm with a street scavenger if he happened to take his fancy, and readily rubbed shoulders with far more trying people—those half-and-halfs whom it is regarded by many as particularly necessary to keep at a distance, if they themselves are to remain the immaculate things Nature has made

them. Such an idea would have been scouted by Sauffrenden. What! a guinea become silver by rubbing against a shilling! Only silver-gilt rubs off.

Captain Wellwood could not be compared to silver-gilt. He was gold—true gold—but not the 22-carat gold of his friend. There was some alloy in him. He said to himself that it was all very well for Bob Sauffrenden, who was now a peer and a great man, to do as he chose in such matters, but for him it was different. He had no handle to his name to show who he was, and consequently every low fellow without eyes to see the difference, unless pointed out by Burke, thought he had a right to hang on to him in a way that could not be done to "a lord." Sauffrenden was a nuisance in that way, and, but for his wife, would have been twice as bad. Philip had often cause to bless her, and there was only one point on which they were at issue.

She would not know the Tolletons, and he would not give up knowing them.

Until lately the Tolletons had known everybody, and Captain Wellwood among the rest. Like other people, he talked of the girls as handsome and good fun, and like other people he stopped there.

Marry them? He thought not.

He liked to go to the house. Everything there was pleasant. Old Tolleton gave a capital dinner, and there was a nice cover for pheasants, which some were ill-natured enough to say he kept on purpose for his daughters' lovers.

The young man had never declared himself a lover, and showed no intentions of doing anything of the kind; indeed it was alleged that had these been demanded of him, he would have declared they were not forthcoming; but still he was made welcome to the pheasant-shooting. He had not fulfilled Helen's hopes, but he remained perfectly good friends with her in her despair. Before the Sauffrendens, as the Sauffrendens, existed, he had gone to Freelands openly and often. Half admiring, half scoffing, it is true, but without a thought of hindrance.

The girls were very young—they were hardly grown up; there was but a year between each; and had they been like most others, it is probable the youngest would have been still in the schoolroom. But who was to keep her there? Not Helen; she found Carry dull company, and eman-

cipated Lily the moment she desired it. Not their father; he got rid of the expense, and took their word for it their education was complete. Mother they had none. She had died when they were little more than infants. The only guidance they received of any sort came from their father's sister, who, worldly, ambitious, proud of her nieces' looks, and impatient for the success which should attend her chaperonage of them, hurried on their accomplishments, filled their minds with ideas of future triumphs, impressed on them rules and maxims such as might have originated from the lips of Lord Chesterfield, and then died at the very commencement of the season which should have seen Helen launched on her career.

The prospect was all changed. Now there was no opening left. Every year, it is true, they went to London, but each time the expedition was felt to be a failure. They preferred to run riot at home.

They chattered and flirted, and men encouraged and admired. They grew reckless, and came to be talked about. That was their history.

Nobody spoke to them, nobody reasoned with

them, or counselled them, or tried to lead them into better ways; they only either whispered about them, or laughed at them.

They were bold, forward girls, and should never be intimate at *their* house. They would come to no good. They would marry scapegraces.

But still people went to Freelands, and were glad of the Miss Tolletons to grace their balls. It was not till Lady Sauffrenden came, that the false smile changed into a frown. She refused their acquaintance, and immediately everybody who had it, felt ashamed. Some boldly threw them over at once; others gradually cooled. But the most continued to keep on a sort of contraband trade with the house, avoiding all public recognitions, and invariably looking round before they entered the avenue gates. If their names were mentioned, even though Lady Sauffrenden were not present, a guilty look invariably appeared on the faces of the company. If she were, they appeared suddenly stricken deaf and dumb.

Lord Sauffrenden confided the case to Captain Wellwood. "She says the girls are forward, and that sort of thing. Between ourselves, she was dis-

gusted with Lily's behaviour at the ball we had when the manœuvres were going on. They are bad style, you know, and anyway she won't have them at Sauffrenden."

After that Philip had never enjoyed the pheasant-shooting without a sense of guilt. He did not mean to give it up, and felt utter contempt for such as had renounced their friends at the will of another; but he had a little, a very little, of the contraband sensation.

He went as often as before to Freelands, but hid the fact at Sauffrenden. It is hard if a man may not have his pheasant-shooting because the girls are bad style. He did not flirt. He had given them early notice that none of the three need expect to be asked to become Mrs Philip Wellwood; and the result was, that he was accustomed to have his day's sport, his good dinner, and musical evening, all very pleasantly—the parties understanding each other, and taking the agreement in good part. Helen, when Captain Wellwood became her despair, or in other words her platonic, cool admirer, found he was still worth a bouquet for his button-hole, and a flower in her

own hair. The other two, finding him not so engrossed with the beauty as might have been expected, were pleased to share his general attentions. Mr Tolleton, who would not have dared to say "No," if his imperious young friend had demanded the hand of a daughter in marriage, being entirely submissive to these daughters' sway, was nevertheless well pleased that there was no such poor prospect, either for his darling Helen, or for her sisters. He had no inclination to dispose of the comfortable eight or ten thousand he could leave to each of them, where there were only as many hundreds a-year to meet them half-way.

Any idea of demanding Captain Wellwood's intentions never entered his head.

Accordingly, the more certainly indifferent Philip became, the better he seemed to get on with each and all at Freelands, and the more he enjoyed going there. He was good friends, and nothing further.

All this was very pleasant, but it gave umbrage to Lord Sauffrenden.

Lord Sauffrenden, in his sociable, whimsical, kindly-affectioned, perfectly proper and respectable way, yearned after the Tolletons. He could not bear to

hear of other people going where he did not go. He hankered after their parties, carefully watched their movements, learnt what they did, and where they went. He had never spoken to one of the three in his life, but he knew which was which perfectly well, and, better than any one else did, what each one was. He knew that Carry was stupid, and that Lily was clever; that Lily drew like an artist, and that Helen sang only rather well.

He knew that Lily was the one who chiefly brought the family into disrepute, and that Helen could behave herself as well as anybody when she chose.

How he knew what he knew, it would have been difficult to guess. All he needed to know was—themselves; and that knowledge was unattainable.

It was Lady Sauffrenden, as we have said, who made it so; and it was the only point on which she and Philip differed. He wondered if Mr Smith were to be another. He saw nothing in Mr Smith but a little stout man turning grey, whose having ten thousand a-year was rather an offence to him. If he were to be set up as anything else, it would be simply ridiculous.

"Nice fellow that Smith, isn't he?" began Lord Sauffrenden, soon after his friend appeared at the Castle. "Milly told me you called—thanks. I think we shall find him an acquisition."

"I called, as Lady Sauffrenden asked me," with a touch of significance.

"Yes, well, I asked her. The fact is, the Lorrimers spoke to me to get him well introduced."

"Is he a friend of the Lorrimers?"

"Oh, by George! yes. The greatest friend they have. Stayed with them, travelled with them, lived with them, in fact, for years. They think there's nobody like him."

This, of course, had all to be sifted; but even after that process, there remained a good deal of extraordinary matter.

"Milly was delighted with him too," Lord Sauffrenden ran on. "Were you not, Milly? What was that you said about him? She hit him off exactly, Philip, but I forget what it was."

"So do I," said Milly, smiling. "It is too much to expect me both to say wonderful things, and to remember them afterwards."

"Well, I don't know. At any rate you liked him."

"I did like him, very much."

"The Lorrimers have put her up to it," reflected Philip.

"Seen the house, Phil?"

"When I went to call."

"Splendid rooms, I'm told."

"There ought to be. It's a large building. What will he do with it?"

"Do! Marry and settle. That's what he ought to do, at all events. I have been racking my brains to find a wife for him."

"My dear Sauffrenden!" exclaimed his wife, laughing. "Was that why you were going over all the daughters of the land the other day? I had no idea you had this in your head. Why, he is quite an elderly man."

"All the more reason why he should look sharp. Elderly? He's nothing of the sort. Nobody is elderly till he's sixty or seventy nowadays. Of course that was what I was thinking of, and if he does not help himself soon, I shall make bold to help him."

"He is not thinking of helping himself, I should say."

"That shows how little you know about it, Milly. You don't keep your ears open, as I do. I say, if he does not find a wife quickly, you and I must find one for him."

"And where am I to find one?"

"Ah, that's your business. He would be a good match for anybody. But wait a little; perhaps he will do without our assistance. Come along and take a turn, Philip."

So saying, and nodding sagaciously, Lord Saufrenden closed the door.

"I'll tell you more about that, now we are by ourselves," said he, when they had taken down caps and sticks. "I have my own reasons for what I said just now. Wait a minute. Don't go that way; I want you to come and see the new dog. He's here, and I think promises well."

"Where have you kennelled him?"

"Next door to Gyp. Look now, what do you think of his head? First-rate, isn't it? Well marked, too. I think he'll do, eh?"

"If he does as well as he looks, I should say he would. It's the same you bespoke in September, isn't it?"

"Yes, from Bushe. But he only came on Thursday. Well done, old boy, well done! Knows me, you see. Yes, I think he'll do, on the whole. Then here are the pups."

The pups were duly seen and handled, and no more was said about Mr Smith.

They were at some distance from the house, and Philip, to whom the subject was indifferent, had forgotten it altogether, when his companion suddenly began—"But I was to tell you about Mr Smith. Oh, and first, have you seen the Tolletons since you came back?"

Yes, he had. The truth was, that he had met Mr Tolleton the day before, who, as a matter of course, invited him in to dinner. With the choice between good cheer and good company, and poor fare with none to share it, the temptation had been irresistible. He had gone to Freelands, not intending to mention it at Sauffrenden.

Gone, however, he had, and Lord Sauffrenden's face fell.

Why could *he* not go? Why should his friend go where he did not? Why should the Tolletons be considered a sort of forbidden fruit, of which

Philip might eat and not be harmed, whereas it would be unwholesome for him?

He felt, like every one else from Eve downwards, that there was something inexpressibly alluring in the forbiddenness, and it did seem hard that others should partake of what he was debarred from, even if it had to be done under the rose.

This complaint, however, could not be uttered aloud.

Philip made his confession with the guilty air which inevitably accompanied it, and Sauffrenden did his best to receive it with a look of absolution.

"Ah, indeed! You have seen them? Then perhaps you know all about it already? Perhaps you can guess how they have been amusing themselves since you went away?"

"No, indeed; they did not tell me. Anything in particular?"

"Why, yes. It's too good a joke not to be something in particular. They have been setting their caps at Smith! That was what I meant in the drawing-room."

"Nonsense!"

"It's a fact. I can tell you all about it. But

don't make mention up there, you know," pointing to the house. "There's no need for her to know anything about it. She likes Smith, and it might put her against him. I don't want that done."

Philip was laughing loudly.

"But listen—you haven't heard the half," proceeded the narrator, with the keenest relish. "I can tell you all that took place. He was up here one day, and drove. Well, he was on his way home, when he overtook the three walking, and the upshot was that Helen got into the carriage, and drove off alone with him!"

"You don't say so!"

"I tell you it's a fact."

"But who told you?"

"The best person in the world, Dr Hunt. His girls were there too, or one of them was, and she went straight to her parents with the story. Of course one can't tell how much to believe, but the fact remains that she did it. That I can swear to, for Hislop met them."

"And what did he say?"

"I asked him if he had seen Mr Smith yet. I knew he had, you know, for I went down the road

to meet him soon after Smith left, so he must have passed the carriage somewhere. He said 'Yes,' with a broad grin, and that he must be a kind-hearted gentleman, for he was giving a young lady a lift. However, he couldn't tell me which of them it was, or anything more, so I went off next day and met the doctor, who spontaneously gave me the whole history. Helen was the one."

"I daresay she asked him."

"I daresay she did. But the doctor's tale was that they were all invited, but none of the others would accept. His girl, at any rate, declined."

"What a thumper!"

"Of course. Smith knows better than to ask her —a spotty-faced thing, like a ferret!"

"Well done, Helen!" ejaculated Philip. "Well done, fair Helen! brave Helen! I couldn't have believed it, even of Helen!"

"But mind you don't let it out to Milly."

"Who? I? What should I let it out for? However, if it comes to anything, she will hear of it fast enough."

"Yes, I suppose so. But then it may not come to anything, and there would be no harm done."

"Do you think it will?"

"How can I tell? You know them; I don't."

Philip winced. "You would know them too, Sauffrenden, if it were not for your wife."

"Of course I should, my dear fellow; I'm not saying anything as to that. Bachelors know lots of girls they couldn't if they had wives."

"But after all, you know, it is but fair to say they are not worse than numbers of others. They don't manage to keep it dark, as some do; but in reality they are not half as bad as they're made out. I must say I think it's rather a shame of some people——" Here he stopped suddenly, remembering that Lady Sauffrenden was one of the people he was referring to.

"Well, I think it is. But, you see, Milly's at the bottom of it," said her husband, frankly. "She's rather sharp on girls; and, of course, she would not like that about Smith."

Philip was silent. He did know, and he could not deny it: it chafed him. Sauffrenden, who would know people in spite of everybody, who had introduced him to many an acquaintance he would fain have avoided, had one elevation on which he took

his stand superior—and that ground was the Tolletons.

He knew that Sauffrenden longed after the Tolletons. He knew that all the time he plumed himself on abstaining from intercourse with them, it was because he felt this to be the only compensation for their loss. And when he had called on Mr Smith, on purpose to please his friend, he did feel it to be rather hard that it was through Mr Smith the naughty girls were now in fresh disgrace.

Therefore he was silent.

By the time they had come under the drawing-room windows again, however, he had thought of something to say.

"After all, you know, the Tolletons——"

"Take care," interrupted Sauffrenden quickly, and glancing up at the windows; "don't say the name so loud. Can't you say *the T's*, and then no one will know who it is?"

"What does it signify?"

"Why, you see," with a little of the guilty air himself, "she's always catching me at it. I don't know how it is, but as surely as I happen to say a word about them—the—*the T's*, you know—a bird in

the air carries it all over the place. So, of course, she thinks I'm always at it. There now, you see." For at this moment out stepped Lady Sauffrenden from the conservatory—a bunch of flowers in one hand, and a pair of garden scissors in the other.

"Well, dear," said her husband, accosting her rather anxiously, "who are these for? Not me, I know; you never give me bouquets now."

"You get one nearly every day," retorted the little lady, good-humouredly. "And you don't deserve them for telling such stories. These are for the drawing-room." Then to Captain Wellwood—"Have you any engagement for Friday?"

No, he had none for any day.

"What's Friday, Milly?" Her husband arrested the invitation.

"Mr Smith is coming to dinner, and the Fultons, and one or two others. I hope Captain Wellwood will come too?"

"Will you come, Philip?"

"Certainly I will come; I always come when Lady Sauffrenden asks me."

"And bring Jumper?"

"Jumper will be very happy."

"I daresay Smith would drive you over if he knew."

"Oh, why should he?"

"Save the Buck. But, of course, four miles is nothing to him."

"I like the walk, if it's fine. I shan't take the Buck."

Lady Sauffrenden pressed her husband's arm, and no more was said.

"He did not like your suggestion of Mr Smith's driving him," said she, as soon as they were alone.

"Why should he dislike it? I would do it myself."

"Yes, you; but Philip is different." She always called him "Philip" when they were by themselves.

"How is he different? I don't see the difference. I thought it would be a convenience to him, as he has only one horse at present."

"That's it; if he had half our horses he wouldn't mind."

"My dear child, what nonsense you talk! If he had half our horses, why should he care to save them? If he had even his usual two, it wouldn't matter so much; but he is saving Buck up till after Christmas. I know that is why he won't go out

with the hounds now. He'll have his other one then; but he doesn't want the old fellow knocked up. I knew he would be glad to save him; that was why I thought of Smith."

"You silly boy," began she, laughing; "that was just why he didn't like it. He didn't like the idea of saving himself at Mr Smith's expense. Poor men are a great deal more particular about such matters than rich ones. I quite agree with him."

"Oh, don't you teach me, Mill. I know fellows who would sponge on anybody for the sake of saving their pockets a shilling."

"It is not because they are poor, then, but because they are mean."

"They are poor too. Being poor makes them mean."

"No, no, it isn't so, Sauffrenden," cried she, warmly; "that isn't the reason at all. It has nothing to do with their being poor. Mean people will be mean, if they were as rich as Crœsus; but if they are not mean-minded, they will take more care about not appearing so when they are poor, than they would if they were rich. I should, I am sure."

"Lady Sauffrenden's decision," said her husband, waving his hands gracefully, "will always be mine.

The pattern husband, Robert Frederick, Baron Sauffrenden."

The lady coloured, and withdrew her hand.

"Now don't be cross, you stupid darling," cried he, catching her round the waist. "I'll kiss you before all the windows, if you don't behave yourself."

"Oh, Sauffrenden, do take care! How *can* you? You don't know who may be looking out. How can you go on so?"

"I didn't do it," said Sauffrenden, making a grimace at the windows; "but I will, unless she's good. Is she good now?"

"Perfectly good; good as gold. But just one thing, dear, do listen for a moment; I wish you would be a little more particular in what you say to Philip sometimes. I think you hurt him without knowing it."

"Hurt Philip!"

"You see he is terribly proud."

"Philip proud? *That* he is not, I am sure. I never found him so. I should say there wasn't a bit of pride about him. He is as good a fellow as ever lived."

"That's the way a man judges. As if he would be proud with you! He's too fond of you."

"But he isn't proud to anybody. I see him with the grooms and people."

"As if he would show it to *them*, either!"

"Then who on earth is he to show it to?"

"He doesn't show it, as you say, to anybody, Sauffrenden, but he feels it. I should say he was the proudest man I had ever met."

"My dear child!" In his amazement he dropped her hand from his arm. "Why, Milly, he goes to the Tolletons'!"

"That says nothing."

"You know it says a great deal. Hardly anybody goes to them now, and you won't hear of having them here. I'm sure I should have no objection, poor things, but I always thought you made such a point of it."

"So I do," replied the lady, calmly. "I don't wish to know the Miss Tolletons at all, and I don't fancy Philip would either, if——"

"If what?"

"If he did not admire Helen."

"There, Milly, now you *are* wrong. He no more

admires Helen than I do. That shows how little you know about it. I could prove it to you, if I chose" (thinking of Mr Smith). "He only goes because he has nothing else to do with himself. He must have company of some sort, and he can't be always here. I should do the same in his place."

There was no doubt of this, and Sauffrenden might feel that he had defended his absent friend with both truth and spirit.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TEA-PARTY.

From the foregoing chapter it will be seen that Lady Sauffrenden was perhaps possessed of rather more insight into character than her husband. Captain Wellwood had not been exactly hurt, but he had been rather amazed by Sauffrenden's suggestion. Mr Smith seemed to be always coming in his way. He had not gone half a mile, before he saw him on the road in front.

"He is going to the Tolletons'!" was the instantaneous conviction. Thereupon Philip quickened his pace, and Mr Smith, being rather a steady than a swift walker, was soon overtaken.

It needed but a few preliminaries on the part of each gentleman to discover that Mr Smith was going to the Tolletons', upon which Captain Wellwood immediately found out that such was his own

destination likewise. Having dined there the night before, he believed he ought to call. Mr Smith was all complaisance, and they walked forward briskly.

Mr Smith had made himself very nice to go to the Tolletons'. He wore a dark coat over light grey trousers, a half-high grey hat, grey tie, and gloves, all good of their kind, and admirably suited to the wearer.

When his hat was on, nobody saw he was grey at the temples, and his ruddy cheeks and thick whiskers looked very well out of doors. His conversation was sensible, and his voice singularly soft and well modulated. In spite of himself, Philip was taken with his companion. There was an open unaffectedness, and a geniality of manner, which could not but please. He did not wish to like Mr Smith, he saw no reason why he should like him ; but had he been asked, he could not, with truth, have replied that he did not.

The ladies were at home, as Captain Wellwood shrewdly supposed they would be.

There were fresh flowers in the drawing-room, and a blazing fire supplied the warmth which the autum-

nal sunshine, now beginning to wane, could not furnish.

Two of the sisters were busy. One had ensconced herself in the window, with her head bent over an illuminated page; the other was engaged in needlework. Helen, who had apparently just come indoors, stood by the table taking off her gloves.

They were much surprised to see Mr Smith, not expecting any one that dreary afternoon. It was such a raw dull day, and the roads were so unpleasant, and it was *so* kind in him to come. Captain Wellwood obtained a polite welcome, but all the enthusiasm, all the *empressement*, were for Mr Smith.

Mr Smith must take the easy-chair, papa's chair, and have it wheeled round, and the glass screen between him and the fire. They must be very good to him, because it was *so* kind in him to come, and it would teach him to do the same again. Tea would be up directly, and they had sent to let papa know; he did not always care for tea, but would be sure to come when he heard who was there.

When the first bustle was over, nevertheless, it appeared to a spectator that the sisters were not

working quite so much in harmony as usual. Carry, for instance, took up her position on the sofa close to Mr Smith's left hand, Helen having playfully settled down upon a footstool on his right; and took no notice of several hints thrown out for her dislodgment.

Helen was sure papa must have come in, and the servant have missed him; he was probably in his own room. Carry, on the other hand, was equally sure that had he done so, they must have heard him put his stick into the stand in the hall; a thing he never failed to do with a great noise.

Next, Helen wanted the blind pulled down. The sun was in Mr Smith's eyes, and Carry was the only one who knew how to manage the blinds. Mr Smith protested that the sun was not in his eyes, and Carry let the blinds alone.

Then Miss Carry must needs show her embroidery-work to Mr Smith, albeit Helen was sure Mr Smith would not care for modern tapestry. He would not, however, himself acknowledge so much. He thought the workmanship ingenious and laborious, and gave great credit to the worker. Carry's spirits rose. With praise of the workmanship, whatever

he thought of the work, the worker ought to be satisfied. She returned to her misshapen monks with renewed zeal. But her end had come.

Lily was not going to sit by and see things going wrong in that way. She had appropriated Captain Wellwood herself, and retired to a distance with him, but she now saw it was high time to interfere. By her prompt aid to one sister, she soon routed the other. She wished to show her work likewise, and having boldly requested Carry to give up her place, seated herself on the arm of the sofa for half a minute, then made short work of the illumination, and returned to Captain Wellwood. It was all done easily, speedily, and well. Helen was left in full possession of the field.

Mr Smith appeared to be quite content with the arrangement. The rest were in the bow-window, he and she alone by the fire. Helen, now shading her face with her handkerchief, now letting the dancing firelight play upon it, now throwing out the suggestion of a small well-shapen foot, now drawing her skirts hastily over it, put herself into a variety of pretty attitudes. Her hat grew too hot, and she tossed it off upon the rug. Then the

necktie must come off too, and the brooch be fastened afresh, and the jacket undone, and a little business made about the whole, which showed off those pretty white fingers with the turquoise rings to perfection. All the time she was prattling to him, looking up at him, wiling, if she could, his heart out of his bosom.

There was no doubt that Mr Smith enjoyed it all; that he liked very well to sit in the easy-chair, looking at the firelight through the glass screen, and every now and then taking a peep down at the handsome head with its glossy coils of hair beside him. He would not have been human if he had not found a certain fascination in this state of things, and he was very human.

"Don't you find it sometimes rather dull when you aren't moving about?" said she once, when the conversation in the window was loud and lively.

"Yes, indeed; but one must get used to it; although I don't think one ever does get altogether used to it, Miss Tolleton. I feel more lonely now sometimes than when I first began to live by myself; it may be coming back to England—when

one is abroad, people seem to live more in company."

"You have been a great deal abroad?"

"The best part of my life. I had no ties at home, and a great desire to see the world."

"It is sad to have no ties, isn't it?" said Helen, softly.

"Yes," meditating, "sad, but not so sad as some things. Friends I am very rich in; they ought to make up to me for the want of kith and kin."

"Only they never do."

"You think not?"

"They would not to me, at least."

"Ah, you are well off," glancing at the other group. "You have a happy home; you have nothing to wish for."

"You forget," said she, in the same soft tones, "I had once a mother."

He felt shocked at himself. The party seemed so complete—the sisters so independent, so self-reliant—that the idea of any blank had never occurred to him. The gap had so filled up that even the marks were invisible. He stammered an apology.

"It is a loss," Helen went on, "which is to be felt, perhaps, more than understood. We were so young that it is difficult to realise what it must have been to us, but I fancy we often feel the effect without knowing what it is."

This was true and genuine, but it was not simplicity which put it into expression—it was rather a high degree of art. Mr Smith was touched, and regarded her with more interest than before.

"I, too" he began. Oh, how provoked Helen was with her father's joyous welcome at that moment!—that moment which might have been fraught with results! They had grown so confidential, so personal! Their voices were so low that nobody but he would ever have dreamed of interrupting. "I, too"—what was he going to say? Was he going to tell her anything? Was he going back to bygone days? going to unlift the veil which hung over his past life? to confide in her? to share with her some memory, some retrospect? Was there ever anything so tantalising? The only comfort was, she fancied that he was as much provoked as herself.

However, the thing was done. A dialogue broken off at this point could by no means be brought to-

gether again. A little graceful reluctance she might show, but rise she must, and ring the bell, and order in the tea.

Corker knew better than to bring tea without its being rung for. He had once or twice committed this tremendous blunder, at the time the autumn manœuvres were going on, and had stopped two declarations, and spoilt a farewell; at least it was in consequence of the belief that he had, that he had been admonished on the subject.

The girls always told their visitors that the tea was just coming up, but it never appeared till they rang for it. "Making it that wash," the indignant butler declared, that he wondered "they could swally it down their throats." He was not allowed, we must explain, to pour the boiling water into the pot till the summons came. Helen, in giving the order, had informed him that they did not like their tea to stand, but good care was taken nevertheless that it did stand a very reasonable time in the drawing-room.

Afternoon-tea at Freelands was a great time. When the autumn manœuvres were going on it was usually held out of doors, and every day there were swarms in attendance. But after all, even with the

addition of peaches and nectarines, the cosy meal was scarcely more pleasant out of doors than in the house. There were plenty of little shady nooks in the drawing-room, that did just as well as the out-of-the-way seats in the shrubbery; and if there were peaches in the autumn, and strawberries and cream in the summer, there were muffins in the winter.

A few minutes after the bell rang, Corker might be heard in the passage. A clink and jingle might perhaps be heard likewise, giving rise to immediate and premature hopes. Then the door would fly open, and our friend appear, to the astonishment of novices, empty-handed. Stepping up to a corner in the wall, he would draw thence a curious combination of legs, which was instantly and under your very eyes transformed into a table—a low oblong table. From the same recess another bundle of legs sprang into another table. A third time the process was gone through, and the three, forming a triangle, stood waiting. A shining tea-service on a shining tray was then deposited on one; a mass of harlequin cups and saucers of the most delicate and suggestive colours on another; and cake, biscuits, bread and butter, and muffins, on the last.

For about ten minutes no one would take any notice, and the muffins would have been ruined had they not had their own private application of hot water beneath.

It depended then very much on who was of the company, which sister took charge of the tea-table.

On the afternoon in question Helen rose, and poured out a delicious cup, frothy with cream, for Mr Smith. She next supplied him with a hot brown muffin, crisp and tender, and guiltless of grease, and finally drew a stand to his elbow to place the cup and plate upon. He was not allowed to do anything himself—"it was against the law of the house."

Her father had next to be attended to. Mr Tolleton's taking tea was according as his daughters gave it him, or not. If there were many to be attended to, he went without. On the present occasion, however, he was to be honoured, and, second to none but the principal guest, obtained a cup which, if not quite so superabundantly frothy, was still excellent, and Helen quite the attentive daughter.

The next was for herself, but as she poured it out she called to Lily to know why she did not come and give Captain Wellwood his tea.

By this Lily knew the coast was clear, and Philip got his tea—but alas! there was no froth on his cream.

Helen helped herself to a corner of muffin, and carrying it off on the saucer of her cup, again took her seat on the footstool.

She had forgiven her father for his untimely interruption, and joined in the conversation graciously. After all, it was not probable that they would have been long undisturbed, as Captain Wellwood did not return to the window after getting his tea, but stood upon the rug. He was quite capable, if he had chosen to do so, of quitting the other sisters even without any special excuse, not standing on much ceremony either with Carry or Lily. Helen thought he very likely would have come up at any rate. Poor fellow! He did not like her neglecting him, it was evident. Therefore she threw the deserted one a smile, and a word or two, every now and then over her shoulder; so much, she felt, friendship required of her. The rest of herself she might devote to Mr Smith.

Papa's conversation began to flag, and she was afraid that Mr Smith would go. But Mr Smith,

feeling very happy where he was, and perceiving that nobody wished him to go, stayed.

Then Mr Tolleton came out brilliantly. His conversation had only declined because he was revolving in his mind the one subject on which he had entire liberty to act for himself, and that was inviting people to dinner. As a rule, his daughters liked having people to dinner, and, from long experience, he had grown so sharp about knowing what people they would especially like, that they now allowed him unrestrained powers of action. He knew they would like Mr Smith; and during the time he had appeared inattentive, he had been reckoning the weeks since his mother's death, to see if he could with decency invite him.

When the invitation was given, Helen's face told him he had come to a right conclusion.

But Mr Smith was very sorry, for Friday he was engaged. One person, who knew as much before, expected to hear him say where. People do, you know. If they are only going to dine with Jones, there may be no occasion to mention it; but if they are engaged to the Castle, or the Park, or the Manor-House, it is more polite to say so.

Mr Smith, however, apparently thought otherwise.

The invitation was then renewed and altered. There was to be no party, they could not have parties just then, being in mourning; he was at liberty to fix his own day; any day would suit, it was all the same to them, as there would be nobody there but himself, unless it were Captain Wellwood; if Captain Wellwood would kindly join them.

Here Helen's face did not show quite so plainly as before that he was on the right tack, but she saw it was inevitable. With Captain Wellwood standing by, and unable to pretend he was not listening, since there was no one for him to talk to, it was impossible to avoid including him in the invitation.

Would Saturday suit Mr Smith? Mr Smith would prefer Monday, if it really were quite the same to Mr Tolleton. He seldom dined out on Saturdays; he liked his servants to have that evening quiet. Monday would do just as well, and Monday was the day.

Captain Wellwood accepted his invitation likewise. Friday excepted, he had no engagements either.

All was thus happily arranged, and, as it appeared,

just in time. Philip had barely made his bow, the "Very happy" was absolutely on his lips, when the door opened, and Corker, with an immovable countenance, announced Mrs Hunt and the Miss Hunts. He then proceeded instantly in search of empty cups; but the new arrivals being only ladies, and, as he contemptuously described them, "the doctor set," he contented himself with ostentatiously carrying out the muffin-dish, and not bringing it in again.

In Mrs Hunt's face there was a look of demoniacal glee. It was dreadful to find Mr Smith there, but it was delightful to catch him in the act. In the same moment that she noted Helen on the footstool, she thanked her stars that she had made Maria close up her jacket, and put on a clean necktie.

Helen rose from her low seat with neither hurry nor confusion in her air. Her lithe figure was made for these ascents and descents. Just touching the arm of the easy-chair with the tips of her fingers, she rose at once to her feet, erect and graceful, welcomed her visitors with cordiality, and named Captain Wellwood with politeness.

It was always said that this girl knew wonderfully well how to behave when she chose.

For Mrs Hunt she provided the same sort of chair from which Mr Smith had risen, and prevailed on him to reseat himself. Placed the chair close beside his, made Maria take up the position from which Carry had been routed, and drew Clare into the proximity of Captain Wellwood. There was nothing any one of them could complain of.

Then Corker brought in the teapot afresh, and when Miss Tolleton saw no muffin-dish, she knew what he meant.

The tea was still good, and though there was no trace of froth on the cream, there was cream. Mrs Hunt could have enjoyed it and her rich cake very comfortably, if it had not been for one thing. Maria was so placed that all the light there was, fell through the window directly on her head. Now, unfortunately, Maria had that day been endeavouring, for some time unsuccessfully, and at length with only very partial success, to twist her hair into the new-fashioned coils which Helen Tolleton assured her were just coming into vogue.

Helen's own sleek hair was twisted round and round her head, and crept down the back of her neck in these coils—soft, glossy, black coils—and

Mr Smith had admired them very much in the firelight.

But Maria's hair was neither black nor glossy, nor was it sufficiently abundant for any but a very experienced hand to have fashioned into coils at all. The consequence was, that in most places the frizettes beneath were altogether laid bare; and that where this was not the case, they were only covered by thin streaks of hair, few and far between, and that hair being of a light sandy hue, very distinguishable from the framework.

Sitting where she did, this was not only perceivable to the mother's eye, but she saw that it was obtruded on the notice of Mr Smith. Mr Smith could not help seeing it; and, in fact, he was at that very moment contrasting it with the other head so lately beside his chair.

Mrs Hunt coughed, fidgeted, and thought what she could do to displace her daughter. The fire was too hot for her? But there was the glass screen. She was crumbling her cake? But the last morsel was being swallowed. Maria was as impenetrable as Carry had been immovable. Her mother saw there was nothing for it but to let her alone.

Maria was in great force. Perfectly unconscious of anything objectionable, she drank her tea, simpered small observations to Mr Smith, and had in truth no eyes for any one in the room but Captain Wellwood.

What a magnificent man! What a lover, what a husband! She and Clare had seen him in church, and met him out of doors; and envied the Tolletons, who spoke to him and danced with him.

But the Tolletons knew that Captain Wellwood did not reciprocate their gently-hinted aspirations, and had therefore taken no notice of them. Now, the introduction had been unavoidable, and Maria was in a fever of delight.

She was rewarded now for her pains and trouble, and the aching arms her long business of the toilet had cost her; and was only a little jealous of Clare, who was taking her teacup out of Captain Wellwood's own hand. Captain Wellwood, when summoned, had unwillingly been obliged to convey one cup, but he had not gone back for another. He yawned, and looked rude and bored, and allowed Lily to give Maria hers.

But what did Maria see of that? Would he speak

to her? Would he notice her? Did he, or did he not, admire Helen?

Helen had disposed of the last question before, with word sto this effect: "My dear child, he is as poor as a church mouse. He never thinks of me, nor I of him." But Maria could not so easily dismiss it; it was too much to her now.

Meantime there was something in her mother's mind which she earnestly desired to accomplish, but yet had hardly courage for. There was nothing in the thing itself to take away her courage, but there was much in the fact that she wanted so very much to do it.

If Maria would only keep her head out of the light, and if the others would only talk a little more among themselves, she thought, however, she could screw up her courage. Then the light did fall away from Maria's head, and the others did begin to talk a little more generally, and Mrs Hunt summoned all her wits, and bolted out with—an invitation to dinner, and Friday was again the day.

At the very worst moment, just when the little speech was far enough advanced to admit of no withdrawal, the other tongues ceased, and the end of it

was distinctly heard by all. She knew it, and knew that her voice faltered as she named the day ; but the thing was done, come what might, and if the invitation were accepted, she cared not who heard it given.

Mr Smith was again very sorry, but (as the others already knew) he was engaged beforehand.

Mrs Hunt's face fell, and her colour rose.

She had not the slightest doubt that his engagement was to the house he was now in. It was all as she had prophesied. It was already a gone case.

There was a general hush. Captain Wellwood expected that now Mr Smith would surely tell where he was going, and the Tolletons listened anxiously in case he did so.

The hush, however, remained unbroken, and in spite of himself Philip recognised a certain nobility in the trifling fact. If no one would tell, he would. He wanted to see what Mr Smith would say. "I shall meet you at Sauffrenden, I believe?" said he.

Then Mr Smith owned such to be the case ; and what a commotion the intelligence wrought among all that planetary circle which had chosen him for their sun! It was as if a brilliant destructive comet had rushed into their midst.

No one had thought of Sauffrenden. Helen, although she knew that he had been there, had not thought of it. She wondered at herself, but she was pleased nevertheless. If—if anything *did* come of it, this would certainly rank as an advantage. However little the Sauffrendens might care to visit Mr Tolleton's daughter, they would be on terms with Mr Smith's wife. Mrs Hunt, too, was tolerably well pleased. Going to Sauffrenden was infinitely better than going to Freelands; and if Maria would only keep that frightful head turned the other way —she was gathering up her courage afresh, but the absolute silence among the other planets awed her.

Captain Wellwood, having dragged the subject, as it were, neck and heels into the conversation, suddenly left it to shift for itself. He had seen how Mr Smith received it, and that was all he wanted. Mr Smith had behaved like a gentleman. He was a jolly old boy, and he began to see why Lady Sauffrenden liked him.

But Mr Smith was not so well pleased with Philip. He did not see why the subject should have been brought in, and was annoyed that one which he already had begun to suspect was not agreeable to

his entertainers should have been forced upon them. He was therefore silent, like the rest.

Helen was the first to recover herself. "How is Lady Sauffrenden?" said she, turning to Philip with an air of concern for her health.

"She's all right. Has there been anything the matter with her?"

"Only she is not at all strong, and tries her strength far too much. But they have been living very quietly lately—no one has been there at all—so I hope she has been taking care of herself."

"No doubt, and got quite well again; for" (a little maliciously) "they expect lots of people next week."

Lots of people! Lots of dear, delightful, smart people! Rotund dowagers, made-up peers, harum-scarum second sons, and girls not a tenth part as good-looking as herself! Oh, how Helen would have delighted in Sauffrenden, if only Sauffrenden would have delighted in her!

Then she looked at Mr Smith. He was stout, it was true, and turning grey; but she felt she should not be ashamed of him. She felt he would not do the things her father did, nor say the things he

said. She absolutely wondered whether *he* would be ashamed of *her*.

Helen was not the hoyden Lily was; nor so stupidly unconscious of her own defects as Carry. She felt dimly now and then that she and her sisters were wild and lawless, and was bitterly indignant if it crossed her mind that they were looked askance upon; but the temptation came, and, in the heyday of her youth and beauty, she stifled resolutions and forgot regrets.

One of these evanescent resolutions came into her mind now, as she looked at Mr Smith; but Mrs Hunt opened her lips, and it was gone.

Mrs Hunt had rallied her forces, and was bent on another venture. If Mr Smith was engaged on Friday, would he make it Monday? on Monday they were going to have a few friends likewise.

Alas! her grasp wanted the breadth of the Tolletons. It was quite as tenacious, as unyielding; but it was timid, as was natural, seeing that there were no coadjutors, and a great forest of enemies' eyes and ears in ambush on every side. If she could have allowed Mr Smith to name his own day, as the Tolletons did—with none hearing the flattering words but

Philip Wellwood, who was in a manner bound over to keep the peace, Mr Smith would have done so, and her point would have been gained.

But she was afraid. She wished it to appear that he had only been asked, on the spur of the moment, to make a twelfth at one of Dr Hunt's little dinner-parties; and, foiled in Friday, took refuge in Monday.

Monday would really have suited her arrangements better, as she did intend to have some other guests; and two additional days in which to collect them would have been just as well.

But when Mr Smith was again obliged to decline, Mrs Hunt *knew* what compelled him.

She rose to go, almost immediately.

Mr Smith rose too, and glanced at his companion. Philip's glance in return was significant. He was not going, and he did not mean to stay behind alone. A slight imperious gesture detained the other gentleman. As the door shut he spoke.

"If you can wait a few minutes, sir, I will show you the short cut through the plantation; it leads into your own."

"Oh, certainly!" Mr Tolleton was obsequiously

endorsing the suggestion, the plantation being his own; but Captain Wellwood proceeded, without having the grace to stop—

"Just wait till that good woman and her daughters are safe out of sight."

Accordingly, they remained another five minutes, and then took their leave.

Before parting in the short cut, Mr Smith had asked Captain Wellwood to favour him with his company on his lonely drive to Sauffrenden, and Philip had been graciously pleased to accept the invitation.

"If she marries him, it will be the best day's work she ever did in her life," concluded he; "but it is rather too good a joke, the way she makes love to him."

CHAPTER VII.

MARIA'S DAY.

Good as the joke was, Mrs Hunt did not see it. Poor Maria had a sad walk home. With her head full of Captain Wellwood, of his necktie, his ring, and his bow—the said head was cruelly used by her mother. She wondered Maria could go out such a figure. She had told her and Clare both, a dozen of times, to come to *her* glass, if that in their room wasn't hung so that they could see properly. Clare might have seen that her sister was decent when she went to make calls; but it was always the way—she was always to be made ashamed of them some way or other. For her part, she wondered what Mr Smith could have thought of it.

Maria cared not a jot what Mr Smith thought of it; all her anxiety was to know what Captain Wellwood thought of it. She appealed to Clare for

a statement of the truth; and Clare owned she could not think where all the hair had slipped away to.

Still Maria obtained some comfort from the reflection that, considering where she sat, at least he could not have seen the whole; and Clare further soothed her with the assurance that one side was a very great deal better than the other.

"It was the worst side that was next Mr Smith," pursued her mother; "right under his very nose. And as if you must needs make it even more observable, you kept turning and twisting your head the other way, as if on purpose to show it to him, whether he would or no. I daresay he thought it was all false together—what there was of it, at any rate; for it seemed to me nothing but a mass of frizettes."

"Oh, mamma, don't say any more about it," interposed Clare, good-naturedly. "It was not so bad as all that, Maria. And it was a good thing the worst side was next Mr Smith, and not Captain Wellwood."

"Captain Wellwood! And pray, what did it matter to Captain Wellwood? What is Captain Wellwood to us?" cried her mother. "A man who has always been as rude and nasty to your father and

me as he could be. A man I have a perfect dislike to, and never wanted to make acquaintance with at all. Oh, he was too fine a gentleman even to shake hands with me to-day, but must needs bow, as if he had been a royal duke, when I passed by. If it hadn't been for him and his airs, I am sure Mr Smith would have walked home with us to-day. I could see he was looking for his hat and gloves when I rose, and then my gentleman went up and spoke to him, and got him to stay, because he wanted to have his flirt out with Helen."

Maria and Clare protested with equal vehemence against this rendering of the scene.

It was far more likely to have been Mr Smith who kept Captain Wellwood. They were convinced Mr Smith wished to stay. Captain Wellwood had shown far stronger symptoms of going than ever Mr Smith had, for he went to the door and opened it. If he did speak to the other, it was to ask him to go too.

In fact, it suited them that Mr Smith should be the culprit, and it suited their mother that it should be Captain Wellwood.

Now that Maria and Clare had seen their hero face

to face, had spoken to him, bowed to him, taken their tea (at least Clare had) from his own fingers, they felt by no means so certain that he must admire Helen. Clare thought he did not take any special notice of Helen, and Maria affirmed he was quite as attentive to Clare herself. She, in return, disclaimed with delight, and assured her sister, as a reward, that nobody but that old fright Mr Smith could have seen the unfortunate hair; and who cared what he thought?

This was for their own room; a different state of things prevailed in the parlour.

There Mrs Hunt was giving a detailed account of her visit to her husband, who, luckily for her, was not one to be either uninterested or unsympathetic. In fact, the doctor was as great a manœuvrer as his wife; and when his dignity was not compromised—and it was a small and easily satisfied dignity—could listen to her with a very good will.

Maria's hair received its due meed of censure, and she knew that such had been the case the moment she entered the room. She knew it by the glance of her father's eye towards her head as she entered, and the evident check received there, for she had lost no

time, after returning home, in disburdening herself of the obnoxious mass.

"Well, I'm glad to see you have made yourself more respectable," said her mother; "and I do hope it will be a warning to you, Maria. For I will say that of the Tolleton girls, whatever be their faults—and I'm sure I'd be puzzled to name another good thing about them—they always contrive to have their hairs nice. Go when you will, early or late, you never catch them with great frizettes sticking out, and hair-pins showing in every direction. What they use I can't say, but Helen's head was like satin this afternoon."

"They don't use anything," said Maria, unable from habit to resist defending her friends, though at the moment she did feel rather sore on the subject of Helen's satin head. "It's just the same when they brush it out, and it is no great merit their keeping it nice, they have such quantities."

"Well, I'm sure it isn't often you hear me say a good word for them," truly rejoined Mrs Hunt; "but I do like to see tidy hair, and that's what I never do see in my own house. I never ask you to go out but there's such a fuss to get the hair done; and nothing to show for it, when it is. Clare's not quite so

bad as you, but I have to speak to her too, most days."

"Oh, well, mamma," put in the doctor, who thought enough had been said, "she'll not do it again. After all, it's no such great crime. My girls stick to what is their own, and don't put on the filthy concoctions of other people—and that's one thing, at all events. Well, Clare," as Clare entered the room, "and what did you think of Mr Smith? Here's your mother quite in love with him."

"I thought him very nice, papa, and he had got such a lovely flower in his button-hole, and——"

"Oh, Clare!" burst in Maria, "*did* you see Captain——"

"Tut! tut!" exclaimed her father, impatiently; "what does that matter? Let Clare say what she was going to say. Go on, Clare."

"You shouldn't interrupt people," added her mother.

"It was his gloves, papa," said Clare. "They were lying on the table close to me, and they were the *sweetest* colour. And then I looked to see what else he had on, and his tie matched exactly, and he

was dressed altogether splendidly,—far better than Captain Wellwood."

Cunning Clare! Both father and mother smiled approbation.

"If Clare, now, had been on the sofa beside Mr Smith, she would have found something to make him talk about, I daresay. Maria only said such stupid things, that nobody could care for, and then kept turning and twisting her head the other way, showing him the whole back, and seeming as if she were listening to the nonsense that Wellwood was talking to Lily all the time. I'm sure I couldn't hear anything very entertaining going on, and it was very rude to Mr Smith. I daresay he didn't think you at all nice or agreeable."

Maria slowly crimsoned during this speech. She had been listening to Lily and Captain Wellwood, she had been trying in a small futile way to attract his attention. Mr Smith she had regarded simply as a barricade.

Clare, who had been the fortunate one throughout, now came to her sister's rescue. She had had a delightful visit. Placed beside her hero, several times addressed by him, handed her tea-cup, favoured

with a special bow at departure. Then afterwards no reproaches nor innuendos, but smiles and commendations from both parents.

She was very sorry for poor Maria, who was always in hot water, which she had neither the wisdom to avoid falling into, nor the tact necessary to extricate herself from.

"Well, mamma," said her defender, "I don't think Mr Smith could have minded, for he shook hands with us both so kindly, and said he hoped we would make use of his short cut whenever we liked—and it was to Maria he said it."

This altered the case. Hopes were again entertained for Maria. Her father's brow cleared, and her mother's tongue softened. Ten thousand a-year had made a great impression on Dr Hunt, since the day on which he had called Mr Smith stout and apoplectic. At that time he had barely received the first shadow of a conception of him as a son-in-law; but since then the idea had matured, and he was as anxious as his wife could be to think and speak of him, if not exactly as the young marrying man, at least as a man who meant to marry, and was not too old for it.

"Well, well," said he, good-humouredly, "that

was very kind and neighbourly, I'm sure. The short cut will be very convenient to me sometimes, I can tell you—that is, if Maria gives me permission to use it.

"I, papa!"

"Yes, you. Clare says you were the favoured person. Perhaps when he gave you leave, however, he did not mean to include your whole family. You may take Clare, however, I suppose. I think, mamma, she must really take Clare, or we shall have it all over the village, if Maria is seen walking about the Hill by herself."

"I didn't hear him say it, Maria," said Mrs Hunt, wistfully.

"No, no, mamma," continued the doctor, looking very jocose; "you didn't hear, I daresay. Mr Smith knew better than that, Maria, did he not? Those are not the sort of things mammas are allowed to hear, are they?"

"I'll tell you when it was, mamma," said Clare. "It was when you dropped your glove, and we were all looking for it."

"And it was under Captain Wellwood's dirty boot all the time."

"Mr Smith was shaking hands with Maria, and Lily said something about its being a longer walk between them and us now, that we had all the way round by the highroad to go; and Maria said Yes, and something about the short cut; and Mr Smith looked at her, and said at once if it was his short cut she meant, he hoped she would make use of it—would not scruple to make use of it, those were the words—whenever she liked."

"And were the Tolletons to do the same?" inquired her mother, anxiously.

"Nothing was said about the Tolletons, but I daresay they took it so," Clare owned. "For Lily thanked him as well as Maria. I think they took it as leave for all."

In saying this Clare sacrificed her friends. But then it lay between her friend and her sister. And moreover, it was true, and it was necessary to be told; and after all, the Tolletons were in such dire disgrace about Mr Smith as it was, that even this could hardly plunge them deeper.

Maria had been skilfully piloted out of her troubles by a way she would never have discovered for herself, and Clare felt she had acted rightly.

Mrs Hunt, as it proved, was too well pleased to be very angry even with the Tolletons. She wondered, indeed, that any girls could demean themselves so. She was sure none but those ever would. But then she was so certain that such impudent forwardness must have disgusted Mr Smith, and so satisfied that the compliment had not extended one inch beyond her daughter, that there was more exultation than anger in her heart.

Maria was now formally consecrated to Mr Smith.

If she went out walking, she was asked if she had been in the short cut. If she met Mr Smith in the village, her father pretended to think it was by appointment. She could not mention his name without blushing, nor hear it without alarm. It was dreadful. What was Mr Smith to her, or she to him? She confided to Clare, with tears in her eyes, her opinion that he was an old horror; and why should she be teased out of her life by having him tacked on to her? It was very cruel.

Clare's worldly wisdom was to this effect. Mr Smith might, or might not, be thinking of Maria; he did her no harm. And since their father and mother had taken this idea into their heads, she

and Maria had obtained a great deal more liberty than they used to have—added to which, they most certainly would never have received those lovely new hats from papa if it had not been for Mr Smith.

"Well, but is it right, that sort of thing?" said Maria, conscientiously.

"How can it be wrong? You had nothing to do with it; it is their own idea. And all you have to do is just to keep quiet, and not put on that face whenever his name is mentioned."

"I can't help it."

"You must help it, that's all. What does it signify? The whole thing will die out of itself, and then nobody can find fault with you."

Clare's expectations were not, it will be thus seen, very strong.

"Don't you see?" she went on. "Mr Smith never bothers you, nor makes a fuss. Though papa chooses to think he does, that doesn't make him. And papa does exaggerate so; he is getting as bad as mamma. I shouldn't wonder if Mr Smith had never once thought about you at all; it was all a chance his happening to say to you that about the short cut, and that is what they go upon most. And

then, what does it matter, papa's laughing? He never does it before people."

"He did it before Lily the other day, and I got so hot; I know she must have seen it. What do you think he said? He asked her if it wasn't rather a strange thing that I never went to the post-office in the afternoons now, without happening to meet Mr Smith. Now, you know," continued the astute Maria, "there is nothing so very odd about it. Papa will send me every day, and he knows that Mr Smith always calls for his afternoon letters himself."

"Oh, well, Maria, Lily would never think anything of that. It would never enter their heads that papa was not only in joke. As if they would ever think of Mr Smith! If you take no notice, it will all blow over."

All this was very sensible, no doubt. But still it dawned upon Maria that whereas it was she who had all the disagreeable part of the business to bear, Clare reaped the benefits in an equal degree. It was therefore, to say the least of it, easy for Clare to talk.

They both enjoyed the increased liberty she had alluded to, and their new hats were precisely alike. When they availed themselves of the short cut,

it was quite as much to please Clare as Maria. Yet Maria alone had to endure the odious joking afterwards.

Clare pointed out that they could not do without the short cut. It was by taking it that they ran their surest chance of meeting Captain Wellwood; indeed they had absolutely met him in it once. Maria was quite as eager as she to meet him, and the day that they had done so, and had had on their new hats likewise, she had forgiven Mr Smith everything.

Captain Wellwood had barely stopped a minute, had remarked it was a nice day for a walk, supposed they were going to see the Miss Tolletons, and moved on. On this meeting, however, they built fresh hopes from day to day. With burning cheeks and bated breath, they told of it at Freelands, and wondered at the coolness with which it was received. At home, it had merely raised a speculation as to whether Captain Wellwood had received permission to be there; and it had been added that he had the face to go, whether he had had leave granted him or not.

But this did not lessen the thing at all. By

themselves Maria and Clare talked and talked, and talked themselves into the most foolish of vain imaginings, and then put on the captivating hats again, and sallied forth in hopes of another meeting. They traversed the short cut daily.

Once they saw his hat. They were sure it was his hat—a grey hat, a quickly-bobbing hat, a hat that was vanishing before their eyes.

"Don't run, but walk as fast as ever you can, Maria, and we'll come up with him at the bridge," whispered Clare, panting. "I know a way down by this bank, here, you see; the leaves have half hidden it, but I know it comes out at the bridge. Take care! What a noise you make! I wish you would not go falling about that way."

"Oh, look, Clare! look what I've done! Such a smear! What shall I do?" in loud whispers. "Perhaps we had better not go on?"

"Oh, nonsense! Hide behind me, and no one can see. Why, what does it matter? it's nothing," said Clare, whose own dress was not smeared. "Now be quiet, and walk slowly, and don't breathe in that way. He can't have come all this round yet. There he is!"

But, oh the disappointment, the vexation! It

was there all right, the hat, but it belonged not to Captain Wellwood, but to Mr Smith.

Maria, in her sudden revulsion of feeling, would have turned back, but Clare stopped her. "You can't now; he has seen us. It's too late; we must just come on. Do keep quiet, and be civil; there's nothing to mind. Papa will be delighted, at all events."

Papa was. He made Clare repeat all about the meeting a dozen times over; and when she came to the part where Mr Smith had accompanied them as far as the stile, and bade them gather his snowdrops and primroses as soon as ever they began to lift their heads above ground, he looked at Maria, chuckled, laughed aloud, and winked repeatedly, till she was as red as a peony.

Mrs Hunt, in high good-humour, told Maria not to mind. Papa would have his joke, and the girls needn't mind him. For her part, she should always be glad to meet Mr Smith, and have a friendly chat, whether it come to anything or not. A nice, pleasant man like that, it was really too bad of papa to go and make them shy with him by saying such things. If he did think of Maria, he had never said

anything; and if she were her, she would take no heed of papa's nonsense, but just be as friendly and easy with Mr Smith as she liked.

Maria was in high favour at this time. There were no more dissatisfied looks, and comparisons drawn between her and Clare, to the advantage of neither, but to the greater disadvantage of Maria. The sisters went to Freelands as often as they liked —far oftener, indeed, than they were wanted there; and the Tolletons escaped with wonderfully little animadversion.

It was Clare's doing, and she had to keep a brisk look-out on Maria all the time, lest in one unguarded moment she should spoil all. She had to keep Maria silent during her father's sallies, by admonitions of eyes, hands, or feet under the table; and all the fuel which kept the flame alive within her parent's bosom was supplied by her. Clare, for a fool, had her full share of fool's cunning.

Of course, the Tolletons knew what was going on, and a fine piece of fun it was to them.

They could make their own out of it, too. By encouraging the idea, insinuating gentle suspicions, and boldly fabricating rumours, they went far to

make poor Maria believe there was truth after all in it.

Then they delicately hinted the same to Mrs Hunt. Mrs Hunt must not believe it was their thought; such a thought had never crossed their minds, but they had heard something of the kind from other quarters. No, they must not name names. *One* of the Miss Hunts; that was what was said. They were not going to ask which, and they would promise Mrs Hunt not to circulate the report further, if she would just say—was it Maria?

Mrs Hunt almost liked the girls that afternoon. She was not going to answer any such questions. For her part, she did not know what they could be thinking of. She had never noticed anything—at least, hardly anything—nothing of the least consequence; and she begged they wouldn't put such nonsense into her girls' heads. Well, if it was either of them, it was Maria; but she was quite uncertain of anything—was really barely sensible of any attentions.

And then she felt almost affectionate to Helen Tolleton.

By that time Mr Smith had dined at the Hunts', and talked a good deal to Maria, as it was natural he

should, when she had been placed beside him on purpose. The doctor's drawing-room had none of those little nooks and corners that were the charm at Freelands; any talking between a lady and gentleman had to be done boldly, under the eyes of all the company assembled.

Maria, however, had acquitted herself well, and her mother's heart beat with pleasure when, on the appearance of the gentlemen up-stairs, she saw Mr Smith draw near to the tea-table at which her eldest daughter presided. Maria herself had more mingled sensations. She felt her dignity, but she felt it a painful one. It flurried her nerves. By instinct she provided her guest with the best tea she could muster; but it was harsh and cold, very different from Helen's creamy cups. Maria never could make tea. It mattered not what she put in, it was always the same. She poured, and calculated, and poured back again, till all were of the same horrid mediocrity. No one was allowed to have a taste, and it was indeed a chance if she suited that of any. Having both tea and coffee to manipulate on the night in question, and the presence of her supposed lover in addition to flurry her, it is to be feared that she gave young

Rawden, the doctor's assistant, a mixture; for he was observed to be making as wry faces over it as if it were a tonic.

Maria was looking very well for her. She had on a fresh white muslin, with blue ribbons. Her mother had superintended her toilet, and at the close, done what she had perhaps never in her life done before, pronounced her approval.

Mr Smith certainly conversed more with Maria than Clare, Clare taking good care that he should, and keeping out of the way for that purpose; and it was on the day following that Mrs Hunt called at Freelands, and owned in confidence that if it *was* either, it was Maria.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WOMAN WHO OUGHT TO BECOME HIS WIFE.

We must, however, go back a little, and see what others were doing while the Hunts were making such progress.

On the Friday for which Mr Smith had had no less than three invitations, it will be remembered that he and Captain Wellwood were to dine at Sauffrenden, and that on Mr Smith's requesting Captain Wellwood's company on the way thither, Philip had granted it with the utmost readiness.

Their entrance together might astonish Lady Sauffrenden, but it could not her husband. He knew all along what nonsense it was that Milly had been talking, and hoped she would now see that Phil was not such a goose as she had made him out to be.

There were several other neighbours in the drawing-room, some of whom had called on the new pro-

prietor, and some who had not; but those who had not, immediately resolved on doing so, seeing him dining at Sauffrenden, and escorting Captain Wellwood. He made his first appearance with *éclat*.

Lord Sauffrenden was markedly attentive to the stranger. As Mr Smith chose to stand in the background, he stood in the background likewise, and during the ten minutes which elapsed before dinner was announced, held him in conversation. Then Mr Smith was requested to take Miss Fulton in to dinner.

Miss Fulton had come with her brother the Admiral. She and the Admiral numbered among their acquaintance everybody of note within thirty miles of Fulton Hall; and many who did not know Miss Fulton otherwise, knew her by name. She was to be seen at every party, every meeting, every benevolent and social gathering in the neighbourhood; and her other brother being rector of Fulton parish, she took upon herself many of the duties of a curate; besides performing to admiration the part of amateur clerk during the church services. What poor dear brother would have done without her she did not know. The Admiral was all very well, but the

Rector was her pet, her favourite, her poor dear brother.

She regarded him as something between a fool and a saint; and was proud of his piety as of an honourable and thoroughly unremunerative distinction, befitting an old family, and by no means common in it.

Miss Fulton was handsome, clever, aristocratic, accomplished, and benevolent, but—eccentric. She was universally liked, but universally laughed at. Her genius was underrated because it was genius, and not common talent. Her performances were unappreciated, because of their originality.

Nevertheless, she was a welcome visitor wherever she went, and nowhere more welcome than at Sauffrenden. Lady Sauffrenden knew a gentlewoman when she saw her, and Miss Fulton was undeniably a gentlewoman. Lord Sauffrenden said this was the rock his wife split upon, and that if a man knew how to stand and how to bow, Milly would forgive his committing murder. To this he had subjoined, that if a woman knew when to speak and when to be silent, Milly would forgive her telling a lie. But Milly had indignantly repelled both accusations.

It was she who had arranged that Mr Smith

should take Miss Fulton in to dinner; and the moment Miss Fulton rose and attached herself to Mr Smith's arm, an instantaneous conviction thrilled through the whole assembly, that that was the woman who ought to become his wife.

The Fultons were poor; and perhaps, considering the age of their family, it was not wonderful that it should have grown a little mouldy. It is difficult to provide for such families. They cannot beg, to work they are ashamed. The Fulton living provided for one son respectably, until, as one of the brothers sneered, he should be fit for Canterbury; at which time he would hold himself in readiness to take orders—the wildest, wickedest George among them all, was this—and meantime he and the others got on as they could; being in and out of debt as constantly as a cork on the water bobs under the wave and comes up again.

Then there was a widowed sister, who always hankered after the Hall, and announced that when dear Cornelia married, she intended to come and take charge of the dear Admiral. Dear Cornelia, however, was a long time in marrying, and her spinsterhood was a jest among many who had not had a

tithe of her offers. She was, it is certain, thirty-nine years of age, when she rose to take Mr Smith's arm, and in another year would be forty.

But then what a difference there is between thirty-nine and forty!

Fulton Hall was not above eight miles from Eastworld, where Mr Smith had built his house on the Hill; and for the sake of that house, those grounds, those carriages, ten thousand a-year, and a husband, it was thought that Miss Fulton might yield her maiden dignity, and sink the name of Fulton in that of Smith.

In another year she would be forty, and that ought to be, if it were not, an additional inducement. If only Miss Fulton were not so eccentric, she might be depended upon to see things in that sensible light. It was time she was married. Mr Smith looked a quiet sort of man, probably easy-going and comfortable. His being at Sauffrenden was a guarantee for his good behaviour; and if allied to the Fultons, he would be received everywhere.

Accordingly, when Miss Fulton put her hand within his arm, and sailed out of the room, with her long, bunchy, black dress sailing gracefully after her,

there was a general sensation, not so much of interest or approbation, as of calm certainty that such a marriage would surely come to pass.

For the fair Cornelia's peace of mind, it was as well that this was all unsuspected by her. She was a great talker, and throughout the many courses her tongue might be heard in its usual strain of brilliant volubility, while she fanned herself, and ate the best of the good things with an appreciating palate and a most happy *insouciance*. After dinner, at Lady Sauffrenden's request, she sat down to the piano. The request was made because Miss Fulton's music was in the Hall. When she dined out, she always sang afterwards; but her singing, like the other things about her, was accounted little of, because it was eccentric. It was customary for strangers in the neighbourhood to be asked by its inhabitants if they had heard Miss Fulton sing; and on their replying in the negative, to make them understand it was rather a joke. As soon as she began, they looked at each other, and those who were quite at the far end of the room smiled.

Now it is true, that had one in contemplation Miss Fulton's countenance, shoulders, or arms, during

the performance, one must undoubtedly have seen something to laugh at. The roll of the eye, the wriggle of the neck, and the flights of the fingers, were ridiculous. But the singing itself was not. She had a fine, full, flexible voice, and her Italian pronunciation was perfect.

When Mr Smith heard her sing, he drew near at once to the piano. The song was one he knew, and he was enough of a judge to know immediately that it was well sung. He came to listen, not to look; and as he luckily stood behind the singer, there was nothing to distract his attention. He was able to enjoy it.

Captain Wellwood, however, was on the broad grin. Lord Sauffrenden stepped behind a window-curtain. The rest of the party, to hide their risibility, looked preternaturally grave; and the lady of the house, bolt upright upon her chair, kept guard over them all, and prepared to say her "thank you" at the end, with as much ardour as she could throw into it.

That Mr Smith, being at the lady's back, should come forward and follow up the "thank you" with a few words of genuine admiration, seemed to some of the party as good as declaring himself.

Lady Sauffrenden regarded it simply as a proof that he was, as she had said, one of the best-bred men she had ever met. She looked at him with new complacency in the silence that ensued, and which no one broke for some seconds.

The Admiral was engaged in confounding himself that he had not waited on his new neighbour before. Miss Fulton was expecting to be asked again, and the rest were watching her.

One thing Mr Smith noticed in the course of the evening. The Tolletons, who were neighbours of most present, who lived within two miles of Sauffrenden, and were nice people, living in a nice place, were never mentioned.

All sorts of scraps of gossip about one thing and another went the round, for Sauffrenden was emphatically a gossipy house; there was sympathy for one friend, smiles for another, interest and curiosity shown about a third, but one name was never heard. It was not his business, of course, but still he would have been glad if the subject had been started. He was far from forgetting the glossy head beside his chair in the firelight; perhaps he had thought even more of

it afterwards than at the time; and once or twice, in the midst of Miss Fulton's animation, not to say flightiness, it rose before him with an odd incongruity. What connection could there be between two such opposite people?

The Tolletons, nevertheless, were not ignored so entirely as Mr Smith supposed.

Philip knew who would not ignore them, and was quite prepared for Sauffrenden's sly whisper when no one was listening, "Any news of *the T's*, eh?"

"It's all in training," with a glance at Mr Smith, who was at that moment engaged in paying his compliment at the end of Miss Fulton's "Il Sigretto." "He is to dine there on Monday; I'm going too."

"Are you? I wish I were. What fun you'll have! What a nuisance it is that they can't behave like other people, and one could go to their house properly! Is it to be a dinner-party? I wish I were going. I wish they would ask me."

"My dear fellow," said Philip, laughing, "nothing in the world would give them greater pleasure than to ask you. If an invitation is all you want, it is easily arranged."

"Well, well; you know what I mean. And so he is to be there, is he? I daresay it will be very pleasant. I daresay Helen will make herself very charming."

"I daresay she will—most certainly she will, if she does as she did the other day."

"When was that? Oh, on the drive. But have they met since? Do you think they have met since? It strikes me they must have been meeting somewhere between now and then, for it is nearly a fortnight since then, you know. Let me see. It was the day he was here—that was a Monday; was it last Monday? No, it couldn't have been, for that was the day we went to the far cover, and you came on Tuesday; it must have been the Monday before, and that makes it right, a fortnight next Monday. What do you think, eh?"

"Well, the fact is," replied Philip, as indifferently as he could, but still with something of the inevitable guilty Tolleton air, "that I met him going to call there just after I left you on Tuesday; so, as you had given me the cue, I thought I might as well see what was going on."

"And so you went too?"

"Yes, I went with him."

"Well?" said Lord Sauffrenden, with the keenest interest. At this moment his wife was seen approaching. "Want anything, Milly dear? Don't tire yourself, my child; let me get it for you."

"No, don't mind, thank you, dear; it is only the key of the photograph-book. I am almost certain I put it on the table by this empty inkstand. Some one must have taken it."

"Oh, of course they have. It's in the book, dear. The book is on the other table, by Mr Smith; I daresay he has been looking at it."

"No, I want it for him. I put it there. But I do believe the key is in it. How could I be so stupid?"

Off she went.

"Well, Philip?"

"We had a grand time," said Philip, "and the old gentleman enjoyed himself immensely, no doubt. As for me, I was nowhere. What a girl that is!"

"Whew!" said Sauffrenden, with a little surprise. "Of course she is, that's nothing new. Besides, she is not the worst of them. Lily's worse, and Carry would be, only she can't get the fellows to

take up with her, unless the others won't have them."

"Lily is odious," said Philip, shortly.

"And so the fair Helen really and truly—well, she might do worse. But it's such an absurd idea. What could have put it into her head?"

"I never saw anything like the girl!" exclaimed Philip, with vehemence; the remembrance of his visit was not so pleasant as he made out. It is hard on a man to be thrown aside like an old shoe, when a new one, however inferior in quality, fits better, and he had been accustomed for so long to fit the ladies at Freelands. "I never saw anything like the girl! She looks up at a man, and talks to him, and makes eyes at him, and goes on in such a way—it's no wonder a simple soul like that is no match for her."

"She means him to be one, nevertheless," said Sauffrenden, punning.

"Pshaw! she means nothing of the kind. That is to say, I daresay it may come to that, but all she thinks of now is to bring him to her feet. It's—it's a shame."

Again his friend felt surprise, but he only ex-

pressed confidence. "I think you're wrong there, Phil. I don't believe this affair will end like the rest. What fun could there be in bringing down an old bird like that?"

"A great deal more fun than a half-fledged one; but it may be as you think, after all. I wouldn't give twopence for Smith's chance of escape if it is so. If she really wants him, she'll have him in spite of himself."

"Well, he would get a wife that many would envy him. I daresay she is good-natured, and would tone down, and all that sort of thing. He might think himself very well off. I wonder how it will turn out. Milly has been turning the tables on me, you know. I said she was to find a wife for him, and so she has fixed on Cornelia. Look, she has settled them down with the photograph-book, and he had her at dinner. I daresay she'll tell me to-night it's quite a thing to be, but she doesn't know what we know. I would give twenty pounds to be at the Tolletons' on Monday night."

"Oh, to dare to say that!"

"Hang it, I forgot! But no one was listening.

Well, remember to give me a full account; and now I'll go and talk to the Dowager."

The Dowager was a great-aunt of his own, who every now and then honoured Sauffrenden with her presence. She was as comely as a fresh skin, blue velvet, and diamonds could make her, and was in her way a great addition to the lots of people whose approach Captain Wellwood had heralded to the Tolletons.

Some of these had arrived, but many more were coming. Sauffrenden's sister Rosamond was coming, and his cousin Mary Percy, and "Fitz," who was a young Fitz-Charles in the Guards, and the Aytouns, whom nobody wanted, and several entire families of fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters, with their valets and waiting-women, so that their Christmas was going to be a merry one.

Philip was also to stay at the Castle; but when that stipulation was made by his friend, it was accompanied by a whispered promise that every facility should be afforded him during the visit, for going to *the T's* as often as he chose. Indeed, it was plain that so delighted was Sauffrenden with the

secrecy, the audacity, and the rivalry attendant on the Tolletons' new campaign, that however much he might envy every one who went to their house, he would no longer repine at their doing so.

Miss Fulton was much pleased with Mr Smith. He had been perfectly quiescent and passively polite, therefore she told herself that he had been agreeable. Then he had praised her singing, and with discrimination. And he knew people whom she knew at Naples.

This satisfied her. She was in good looks and good spirits, and having once ascertained that her companion was worthy of it, she bestowed upon him the full flow of her mind. As usual with her, she talked so much that she almost forgot whom she was talking to.

The Admiral, however, had not forgot. Ten thousand a-year, French cook, billiard-table, and '34 port —what a fool he had been not to leave his card before!

Confound the fellow's name! If he were Brown, Jones, and Robinson rolled into one, he didn't care. If Cornelia could only hook on there, it would be the snuggest anchorage for him that ever an old

craft got into. He was already contemplating the loan of loose occasional hundreds, and considering how he could best manage to keep a couple of steady-going hunters at a brother-in-law's expense, when he was roused by the immediate presence of the object of his reverie himself. His sister was in the act of presenting him.

The Admiral made his best bow. He was at the same time more arrogant and less proud than she. From the time he had learnt the name of the man who was building the great house near Eastworld, he had contemptuously dismissed him, house and all, from his thoughts. Directly he met the stranger, a guest at Sauffrenden, heard of his wealth, and found him a bachelor, he was his very humble servant. He knew how to spread his sails to a fair breeze, whatever Corny did; and even she observed with surprise the lowness of his bow. She did not understand it. Thomas was not always so affable. Had she known what was in his mind, she would have bitten her tongue out with shame. As it was, she was only a little agreeably astonished, and stood by for a few minutes, listening.

The Admiral entered into conversation at once in

a bluff, hearty, off-hand way, whose openness seemed to guarantee, "Here he is! I'll answer for him! Simple old sailor, very friendly, true and honest to the backbone, and as guiltless of machination as a baby." The Admiral had hoped to have had the honour of waiting on Mr Smith before, felt quite ashamed to meet him anywhere but in his own house for the first time; but he must look it over, must consider old fellow's infirmities; no longer in his prime as Mr Smith was, and had been fairly tied at home by the leg.

Gout and rheumatism was his mixture, sometimes stronger of the one, sometimes of the other.

Capital doctor, Dr Hunt. Mr Smith had not yet had occasion for his services. Hoped it would be long before he had. Doctors were like Mother Carey's chickens, only to be seen in foul weather. Had a friend who was asked the other day for his doctor's name, and couldn't tell, for he hadn't consulted one for fifteen years! That was the sort of man to live with, and get an appetite for your meals. However, he must say for Hunt, that whenever he came to Fulton he stayed to dinner, and took his port like any other Christian.

Well—ah—fine open weather. The meet was at Fulton on Monday, would Mr Smith join them at breakfast?

He didn't hunt? Ah—but he might ride to the meet—would be very happy to see him; and Miss Fulton and the ladies would show him the old ruins afterwards.

Mr Smith thought he might ride to the meet; and, if he did, would certainly avail himself of the Admiral's hospitality. Miss Fulton had next to endorse the invitation, which her brother loudly informed her of.

She did it cordially; and he felt that he had now, at least, thrown out one grappling-iron. The ruins would do for Monday; and though he had been rather staggered by the not hunting, he was able presently to reflect that even that might turn out to his advantage. Brothers-in-law who don't hunt can't spend their money on hunters; and if there were no expensive taste to run away with the fortune, why, it was a thousand times the better. He would be able thus to indulge the few moderate desires of his dear Cornelia's brother; and he could give Corny the hint whenever he wanted anything.

Corny was a good soul, and, by George! it was time she had a husband; but he must take care how anything of that sort got to her ears.

He knew better than to start her on her high horse. No, no; all he had to do was to get Smith to Fulton, and manage the business himself.

As they departed, he took care to say, "See you on Monday, then?"

And Mr Smith replied, that he certainly hoped so.

When Monday came, however, all had changed. The weather was no longer soft and gently dull; there was heavy rain, and no break in the clouds gave hope of anything better. It was not the sort of morning on which one cares to rise betimes, and ride eight miles to breakfast at another man's house. It was not a day for ruins, or anything else. Miss Fulton must wait.

He reflected that he was going out to dinner, and concluded to take his other meals at home.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WOMAN WHO OUGHT NOT TO BECOME HIS WIFE.

ALTHOUGH the Tolletons had made a great deal of their family bereavement as a reason for there being no dinner-party, it may be doubted whether, in any case, they would have been able to give one. As may have been gathered, they found some difficulty in collecting their neighbours when they wished to entertain.

In asking Mr Smith, it is true, they much preferred having him alone, or with the simple addition of Philip Wellwood, with whom they stood on no ceremony. But when they had wanted to have a dinner-party—and they had been very desirous indeed of giving one a few months previously—for reasons which have no place here, they had had such diffi-

culty in getting it up, that in the end it had collapsed altogether.

The Fultons had made it clear they would not come. The Deanes, an easy-going father and mother, whose two sons cajoled or coerced them into a tolerable degree of intimacy at Freelands, were away from home. Mr and Miss Gray had accepted, and drawn back, offering a very shilly-shally excuse. And Mrs Rodney had a baby the day the invitation was sent her. There was nobody left but the Hunts.

But the Hunts had been met so often at Freelands, by the people who were wanted for the dinner-party, that Helen had declared it was impossible they should be the only others present again. It would have an odd appearance. It could not be done.

That party, accordingly, had fallen to the ground, and it would have been perilous to attempt another.

"I really don't know that we could have managed one," said Helen, "unless we had got the Deanes. If they had come, and had had some people with them, it might have done; but there is no one else just now. After all, poor grandmamma's dying is not so very inopportune; it saves so much trouble."

"And will really be far pleasanter," said Lily, thinking of the dinner-party, though it sounded as if she meant a disrespectful allusion. "Come and make preparations now," added she.

When the preparations began, Corker knew at once that it was Miss Tolleton's party.

Helen never went into the kitchen on ordinary occasions, leaving the housekeeping department to Carry, who had a turn for it. On this day, however, she accompanied her sister, and took an interest in the bill of fare. She even engaged to find a special receipt for the cook, and did it. She wished the wild ducks dressed in a particular way. Men, she knew, loved wild duck.

The gardener had next a visit. She chose the plants for the table herself; and then snipped off every available blossom in the greenhouse, before his angry eyes. The last bunch of grapes was ordered to be sent in; and when the young lady lamented so feelingly that there was not one of each colour, Maclaren felt sure there was something in the wind.

The sisters dressed the flower-glasses in company —that they always did themselves; but Lily was sur-

prised to see her sister lay aside several small and choice blossoms.

"You can't make them bouquets when they aren't staying in the house," said she.

"They won't find fault with them on that account, Lily."

"But they will have them of their own."

"So they will! I never recollected that. Well, but a thought strikes me; I shall make them, all the same."

Helen would not tell her thought. She laughed, and nodded, and said they must wait for it. The thought was, however, that if Mr Smith should come with a flower in his button-hole, she would show him the way to dispose of it.

Lily stood by and watched her sister, and laughed at her.

Helen was not making the correct old gentleman's bouquet at all. The correct old gentleman's bouquet was large and gorgeous—not particularly fragrant, and quickly strung together. But Helen had taken the last sprig of verbena, and the one small velvety geranium, for Mr Smith; and Philip was to be put off with the rose.

"Philip will find it out, you may be sure," said she. "Here, let me make his. I daresay I could scrape together something better than that out of the greenhouse. And you might have given him the heliotrope, when you know he is so fond of it. It's lost on the drawing-room table. Give me the scissors."

"It scents the room," said her sister, handing a thick empty stalk, while her eyes were fixed on the tiny bunch she held in her left hand.

"Scissors," said Lily, impatiently. "I'll see what I can do for him; but I think he might have that."

"Well, if you cannot get anything else, you may take it. There now, what do you think? That little bit of white makes it perfect. It's too good for him."

"Give it to Philip, then. He won't appreciate it, and Philip would. Guardsmen always do. They know better about these things than any other men."

"Indeed I shan't," said Helen, thinking in her heart that she had wasted too many bouquets on Philip already. "I have made it for Mr Smith, and he shall have it. And you are quite wrong about his not appreciating, Lily; I tell you what, I don't believe anything escapes him."

"You said it was too good yourself."

"I was only laughing. I wouldn't give him a poor thing for the world. One has a feeling that he has been accustomed to the best."

Lily looked at the scissors dubiously. "Now, mind," added her sister, with decision, "that you don't take the heliotrope, unless you really and truly cannot get anything else. I am sure that rose would have done very well; a rose is a great rarity at this time of year."

"Not one like that," said Lily, contemptuously. "A poor washed-out China bud! I should be ashamed to offer it to him, and I don't believe he would wear it, either."

"He would have to wear it."

"Would he? I don't think Philip knows what it is to 'have.' Certainly, he sometimes treats us rather cavalierly, don't you think? I daresay he is the same to every one."

One of Helen's bitter sensations passed through her as Lily spoke. She felt sure that he was not the same to every one; that others too presumed upon —upon what? Was it upon their being motherless, unprotected girls, or upon anything about themselves

which invited freedom? It gave her a passing qualm, and her thoughts turned to Mr Smith with a new satisfaction. She was resolved that he, at least, should never find her too familiar.

When the two guests arrived, the ladies were all in the drawing-room, and Mr Tolleton received them in the hall.

The sisters were dressed alike, as usual; but as usual it was on the eldest chiefly that the dress was remarkable. She wore a white silk, short and plain in front, but flowing far behind; the open square showing her neck was edged with soft lace; and over the left shoulder was passed a black silk scarf, tied at the waist in a large bow. So far, all three were alike; but Miss Tolleton had seen when she was out several bunches of red arbutus berries, which she had plucked, and wreathed among her dark coils, instead of any other ornament. There were only two bunches ripe, and Helen took them both; not meaning to be selfish, but without a thought.

Lily had asked for one, and her sister had replied that in that case Carry alone must go without, and besides it needed both sprays to make up an effective bunch—one without the other would be poor.

Lily saw the force of both arguments, and was resigned. She merely took note that it was a good idea, and resolved to remember for another time how becoming it would be to herself.

The moment the gentlemen entered the room, there was no doubt about their bouquets.

Mr Smith wore on his breast a small and very perfect pink and white streaked camellia; Captain Wellwood, one equally, if not more beautiful, of the purest white. Helen's first quick desire was that Mr Smith's should have been the white one. Then she wondered how it had become Captain Wellwood's.

This was soon explained. Mr Smith had given it to him—had brought it in the carriage and pinned it on himself. It was told while Helen was presenting her offerings, or rather saying how she had meant to present them; but now—cut short by Mr Smith's doing the very thing he ought, taking out his camellia, and begging her to wear it herself, while he replaced it by what she had made for him. If it had only been the white one!

This example of gallantry, however, was not imitated. Philip observed that, as his blossom was already a gift, he could not have the pleasure of

asking any lady to wear it for him, but he should be most happy to put in both; and, so saying, crushed the bouquet into the same button-hole.

The girls began to admire the camellias, and as both came from one greenhouse, they were at liberty to compare them.

The white one was clearly the favourite. Even their father was struck by it. He knew something of gardening, and his daughters were pleased that he should shine in such a respectable taste. He had seldom seen such a blossom, he must confess he wondered that Mr Smith liked to cut it. Mr Smith owned that his gardener, at least, had not liked cutting it. He had grumbled at defrauding a tree so early in the season, and hinted at rumours of a camellia show; but his master had pacified him outwardly with promises that if a show really took place, he should be allowed to contribute. "Provided," added Mr Smith, "he did not stint me till the thing was really announced." He believed, however, that the man was in his heart by no means satisfied. Gardeners never were.

Then dinner was announced. It was rather a blow to Lily that, being the youngest, she was

obliged to put up with her father's arm, and sit opposite Captain Wellwood. Now that Helen had openly discarded him, she felt persuaded that Philip would turn to her—if, indeed, he had not done so already.

But, in truth, Philip had never turned to her less.

Up to the present time he had, perhaps, if he had thought about it at all, preferred her to Carry. She was equally well-looking, and more amusing in her banter. Carry, placed in any other family, would have been a dull, quiet girl, put down as sensible, and admired for her reticence; but as it was, she imitated her sisters, and chattered and flirted as well as she was able. She had all their folly, with none of their wit.

Philip had been accustomed to amuse himself with Lily in a more easy and familiar manner than Helen liked, but he had almost ignored Carry.

On the last occasion, however, when he had been in their company, Lily had been fast going down in his estimation. There was a satisfaction in her glances at Helen; a mounting guard over her and Mr Smith; an air of warning off Carry; and of

keeping herself and every one else out of the way, which was very offensive.

Helen might choose to marry Mr Smith, and, if she did, nobody need object; but she was surely able to carry forward the business herself, and guide him safely through its various intricacies up to the proposal point, without any need of her sister's acting spy, scout, and sentinel all at once.

If he spoke to Helen, Helen answered pleasantly enough, but Lily's eye was upon him. If he moved, she was at his side. He could not shake her off. He began positively to hate her.

Carry was now by many degrees the higher of the two in his estimation. She at least did not sanction the other arrangements. She ate her dinner almost in silence, and, when spoken to, answered as if she desired to be let alone. When let alone, Philip was certain that she was listening to the conversation at the head of the table. That Lily, between whiles, was doing the same, he likewise felt convinced, but there was a wide difference between the sisters' listening.

Lily listened as if she liked it, as if she were inwardly congratulating herself upon it, and building

up all sorts of future possibilities from it; Carry, with a sort of sulky determination not only to hear as much as she could herself, but by forcing others to do the same, prevent anything being said that could not be made public.

The sisters had instructed their father to be as cheerful and chatty, and make as much noise as he possibly could; but it is rather a difficult thing to make a noise all by yourself, and so the poor gentleman found it. He did his best. He addressed a joke to Captain Wellwood, and Philip regarded him with mild inquiry; he spoke to Carry, and she let fall the subject so quickly that he felt quite cross with her. Lily herself, from whom he had received his instructions, talked and laughed spasmodically; pinched his feet under the table to make him go on, when he had positively come to the very last dregs of what he had to say; put nonsensical questions in a loud, vacant voice; and altogether disconcerted instead of helping him.

At length the silence among the other four became of such long duration, that Helen was obliged to turn to her left-hand neighbour. Mr Smith at the same

time began a general conversation on the topic of the day, and soon they were all talking together.

Still Philip felt that Lily's eye was upon him, and that she would have prevented his speaking with her sister if she could. In the evening it was the same, and it occurred to him that if this were to be always the way, he should not care to take advantage of Lord Sauffrenden's offer of facilities for going to *the T's* during his Christmas visit at the Castle, as much as he might have done once.

Helen sang in her slow, speaking voice, ballads, not over well sung, perhaps, but almost too full of force and meaning. Ballads about love, and hope, and despair, and other things that girls do not usually sing about. Sometimes she almost whispered, and let her eyes express what she meant to say; sometimes she threw out the words with fire. What was she dreaming of? Did she think to win him thus? Did she really fancy she could make this common, comfortable, middle-aged, prosaic man imagine that hope and love, or even that blessed despair which is the heritage of true adoration, were

for him? It was too absurd, too daring an idea. Yet there were no bounds to her ridiculous vanity, and perchance his credulity might equal it.

The mocking smile was still on Philip's lip, when a voice at his elbow made him draw back as if an obnoxious reptile had touched him. "Captain Wellwood, do come and let us have a game of four bézique."

"It is a game I never play, thanks."

"I am sure you do; you must have played it here. Not that we care very much for it, either. There are some games much better fun. What do you like?

"Oh, don't wait for me; you can have three bézique, you know. I like music better."

Nothing more could be said. If a man has the courage to say boldly he likes one thing, it is impossible to urge him to the other, especially when there is no scapegoat who can be cited as the one to be obliged. Lily could not say "to please Carry," or even "to please papa," least of all "to please me." She was obliged to retire, and hide her mortification as best she might.

If people liked Helen's singing, it generally meant

that they liked Helen. But what detained Philip was not Helen; it was simply the rare entertainment he found in watching her. He meant to stay, whether she liked him to be there or not.

It did not appear, however, as if Helen objected. She smiled on them both, united them in what she said between the songs, and listened with equally good grace to the compliments of either.

This went on most of the evening, and at last Philip thought he had had enough. She was quiet now, and more like her everyday self; he would allow her to play out her game. As she brought a little homely German air to a close, he moved away.

Mr Smith stayed where he was. He could not help contrasting his evening in this fascinating house with the dull dinner-party at Sauffrenden. True, had he minutely inquired of himself, he must have owned that he was not enamoured of the society of Mr Tolleton, and with the younger sisters he had not exchanged half-a-dozen words. But if in Helen lay the charm, it was diffused on all around her. She cast a glamour in the eyes of those who looked, and they could not tell from whence it came.

Helen, in her white silk, with the arbutus berries in her hair, was quite as beautiful as in her plumy hat. It occurred to him that none of the ladies at Sauffrenden had worn natural flowers. He wondered still more that her own sisters, with such an example of taste before them, could select stiff artificial rosebuds. Thus we observe blindly. It never struck him that it might have been from necessity, not choice.

"I hope you take advantage of my path sometimes," said he, some time after Philip had gone.

"I did not know that we might."

"Indeed! I thought I told your sister so; but perhaps it was Miss Hunt. One of the young ladies said she had been obliged to take the long round by the highroad, and I felt so sorry that she should think of doing such a thing. I rather think I remember that it was Miss Hunt, but I hope that you will all make use of it, whenever it is convenient."

"Thank you; we shall be only too glad. It cuts off nearly a mile of the way to the village, and makes such a much pleasanter walk besides. Those beautiful woods were so lovely last spring, that we were tempted to trespass sometimes,—there being

no one there, you know. Oh, I wanted to ask, Mr Smith,—are you going to have a summer-house at the view?"

"The view? I really don't know."

"Where the broken-down seat is, you know, where the long path comes out from the woods."

"I have never been there, Miss Tolleton, and had no idea that such a place existed."

"I wish I could describe it to you; it used to be my favourite walk in old times. Let me see; we go through the plantation—our plantation—first, climb over the stile, and strike into the wood path."

"Yes, and it leads into the avenue."

"Ah, but just where it joins the avenue, another little footpath turns to the left, and goes up the hill among the woods, a long, long way, before it comes out at the view."

"Really I had never noticed it."

"That must be because of the dead leaves. Unless you know it is there, it is probably so covered up just now, you would never find it."

"You say it is a favourite walk; will you and your sisters show it me some day?"

"Yes, certainly, we shall be delighted. And then

you will put up a summer-house at the view, won't you? It would be such a delightful place for a summer-house, and the old tumble-down seat must be quite rotten by this time. I wonder you had never heard of the view; we think so much of it in these parts. There are four counties to be seen, and the cathedral tower, and it is supposed the smoke of London, when the wind is in the east, but that I doubt. However, you won't mind if that fails."

"I am quite curious to see the place. As for the summer-house, all you have to do is to name the spot, and a summer-house there shall be. And come as soon as you will; it shall be begun the next day."

"To-morrow, then?" said she, with sparkling eyes.

"To-morrow, if you please. And what hour?"

"Is twelve too early? We have an engagement in the afternoon."

"Twelve will suit me admirably. It is the best time of the day for walking. I shall be at the stile at twelve."

Then there was a pause while each was thinking about the sisters.

Helen was wondering whether they really must go, whether they were expected, or whether she might not leave them behind. She would rather have been without them. She liked having Mr Smith best by herself. She almost felt that if they went, it would spoil her walk altogether.

But still, if they were expected, there was no help for it—go they must; unless, indeed, she could invent apologies at the time. After a few minutes' reflection, she decided to have it so. She would not say a word about the expedition to any one, and if, when they met next day, Mr Smith inquired after her sisters, she would have their excuses ready. After the walk was over, it would be time enough to tell them of it.

Mr Smith in his own mind had a passing struggle likewise.

When he first proposed the party, he certainly intended it to include all the three. It was something in Helen's manner, nothing in her words, which conveyed the idea to his mind that she possibly meant to give him her company alone. He could not but own he would prefer this, although it was perhaps a presumptuous desire. Fortunately

it did not rest with him, and he was able to close the compact cheerfully, content to wait for its fulfilment.

After this they joined the others.

Lily had grown quite boisterous in her laughter and nonsensical questions, plaguing and perplexing her father more than ever. Philip had quite deserted her; Carry had made some surly attempts at civility towards him, and they sat side by side, apart from the rest, yet apparently not caring to be together—like a couple of arch-conspirators who, suspecting and distrusting each other, are bound by no ties of mutual regard, but merely by a common purpose.

Helen sat down on the sofa by her father, and Mr Smith took a chair opposite. Mr Tolleton's spirits revived, and Lily was subdued. Now and then she glanced at Captain Wellwood, but he and Carry still sat in their gloomy corner, gloomily conversing.

She was enraged with Philip. Her boisterous spirits were an attempt to conceal her mortification. She had reckoned upon the reversion of him. When he had shown distinctly that he was not in love with her sister, she had taken it for granted that he

would, if not exactly fall in love, at least be on very friendly terms with her. Then Philip had shown he did not care to take this position. At least, he liked them all equally. It was not until this evening, that she found out that, openly neglected by Helen, he nevertheless preferred her.

This was hard to be borne. If Helen had monopolised him, and he had sworn even an unmeaning allegiance, it would have been quite the natural order of things in that house; but that, without the power of making him adore her, she should still have sufficient to make him prefer her, was more than her sister's fortitude could bear.

She was not angry with Helen, reserving her wrath for Philip. Helen was doing very well, and she only felt a slight increase of desire to see her fairly transformed into Mrs Smith. But she longed to vex Philip. And it somehow took possession of her mind, that the louder she laughed and talked with her father, and the longer she left the other two alone by the piano, the better she could accomplish this end.

When Helen drew near to the fire, she expected to see Philip come forward also. Philip, however,

remained where he was until the carriage was announced, and she felt faintly surprised. She concluded her judgment had been hasty. The case was not desperate.

A minute after the carriage was announced, Helen wandered off to the piano again, and began to put up her music. If Mr Smith had anything to say to her when he bade good-bye, he might have an opportunity of doing so without witnesses. Mr Smith had a word to say, and though unconscious of its being so, it may be questioned whether he would have been able to say it, had they not been out of earshot.

"Twelve o'clock to-morrow?"

"Yes."

They shook hands, and he passed on. Captain Wellwood did the same, with simply "good-night;" and the door closed behind him.

Helen finished putting up her music, closed the instrument, and came up to the others. "Well, I hope *you've* had a pleasant evening, Nelly," said her youngest sister, with a yawn. She did not speak crossly, and if her own evening had been pleasant, would assuredly not have yawned; but how soon we grow weary when we are not enjoying ourselves!

Helen was not in the least tired, and owned that she had had a very pleasant evening.

"But you have nothing to tell us about it? I am sure you might have enough, for you and Mr Smith were all in all to each other, and spoke to no one else all night."

"Oh yes, we were great friends, but I am afraid there is nothing more to say. Our conversation would scarcely bear repetition."

"Now, Nelly, you know what I mean. Why can you not tell me outright? Is it to be, or not to be, —that is the question."

"Oh, to be, to be, of course. All in good time," said Helen, playfully. "Don't be alarmed, and don't be in too great a hurry. We have only seen each other two or three times——"

"Quite enough too! What should you want more? He can see that you're handsome, and I should think you have had quite as much as you care for of his courting. Take my word for it, Nelly, the more he sees you the less he'll like you." Do what she would, Lily could not bring herself to speak good-temperedly.

Helen's eyebrows came together. "How stupid you are."

She felt that nothing would induce her now to tell Lily about the walk. Her coarse allusion to the courting, and the half-jesting, half-spiteful remark which followed it, decided her. As much as she cared for of his courting! Why, the courting had never begun. She felt persuaded that he had as yet no idea of such a thing. How long he would remain in such happy innocence, was another matter. Vanity whispered not long, and its flattering, buoyant visions made her soon break out again into her complacent smile.

"My dear child, you are too childish. Don't let your feelings run away with you so. I must tell you distinctly, and once for all, that whatever may come of this—and to comfort you, something I do expect may come of it, though not yet:—I say he has never yet thought of me in the way you mean."

"Never thought of you!" She was accustomed to such very quick measures, when Helen was in the case. It was too disappointing.

"Well, I'm sure I did my best for you all to-night," said their father coming in, and yawning vehemently.

"Heigh ho! Ho! ho! ho! My throat quite aches with talking. Mr Smith must think me a great fool, if I go on like that always."

"Poor papa!" said Helen, still complacent. "You did talk tremendously hard. I thought you were enjoying yourself."

"So I was, my dear, I'm sure, if you were. Well? You and Smith seemed great friends, eh?"

"I like him very much indeed, papa; and I think he likes me too." This was to reward them all.

"But she says he is never thinking about her," ejaculated Lily, who had no scruples about saying in plain terms what Helen would have merely insinuated.

"Well, well, time enough," replied Mr Tolleton, glancing at Helen, whose forehead had again drawn together. "What should he be thinking of her for? I daresay he thinks she's a spoilt monkey, and so she is. Where's Carry? Gone to bed? I'll go too. Tell me when you want him here again, Nelly, and I'll get him for you. He will be ready enough to come when I ask him, I daresay."

Helen thought he would. She did not want him asked, however; she had other ways of working. She

meant to have her walk on the morrow, but she meant to have it without the knowledge of her family. With this resolve fixed, she went to sleep, and nothing occurred in the morning to unsettle it.

CHAPTER X.

THE WALK TO THE VIEW.

With the rapidity peculiar to November, the weather had again changed, and that morning was soft and balmy, with abundance of sunshine.

Helen rose in high spirits. She had arranged in her own mind the night before, how Lily was to be disposed of; and as Carry seldom cared to go out in the mornings, nothing was to be apprehended from her.

Accordingly Miss Tolleton complained of headache and the unseasonable warmth of the day. It was oppressive. She could not stay within doors—was restless and fidgety, and soon strolled out into the garden. By-and-by she returned from the greenhouse, bringing with her some foreign leaves which Lily had talked of painting.

"Look, Lily, I have brought these in for you. Do you want them?"

"I did not want them to-day," replied Lily, looking at the leaves ungraciously. "I am not in the mood for drawing. Why did you not ask me beforehand? I shall have to do them now."

"Oh no, they can be put in water. Let them wait till to-morrow, and they will be quite as nice. I thought you would be glad to have them—that was all. You said so the other day."

"Well, thank you, but I wish you hadn't. However, they won't keep fresh, of course; that flabby kind never does, so I must do them at once." And she languidly went for her colour-box.

Helen put the leaves in water, and took off her hat. "What did you put on your best hat for the garden for?" inquired her sister, suddenly. "No one is coming, is there?"

"Not that I know of, but I cannot find my old one. I thought you or Carry had got it. Where can it be, then? Carry, have you seen my old hat anywhere?"

Carry had not. "Where can it be?" repeated Helen, making a fuss. "I made sure one or other of you had it. What can have become of it?"

"Very likely you left it in the greenhouse yester-

day, when you were getting the flowers," said Lily.

"I don't believe I did. I don't think I had it on. It must be somewhere in my room."

Whereupon she went to her room. The hat was there, as she knew perfectly, but she did not like herself in it. Twice she had tried it on, to avoid observation, but it would not do. It was low in the crown, and unbecoming. Its shabbiness was no objection. She put on her shabbiest and roughest old jacket, but her plumy hat and a clean necktie she must have. Accordingly she had put these on when she went to the garden, and now returned from her room without change. It was very provoking, but she could not find her straw; and with several complaints she sat down and took up a book.

It was twenty minutes to twelve, but a quarter of an hour would take her to the stile.

"I can't read," said she, throwing down the volume at the end of five minutes. "Come out for a walk, Lily."

"How can I, with these leaves to copy? I should much rather have gone out," said poor Lily, who was really feeling flat and headachy, and saw herself

ruthlessly pinned to the house for some hours. "If you had only asked me before you cut them!"

"Oh, you have done enough for to-day. Leave them till to-morrow to finish. Come."

"You don't know anything about it. As if I could! They would be quite spoilt. I would not leave them now for the world."

This was as Helen had foreseen. She came and looked. Lily was getting interested, in spite of her disinclination for the job. She was succeeding, and that was enough. Everything else was now secondary.

"That part is well done," said Helen, "when you have rounded the edge a little more. I suppose it is not finished?"

"Finished! Of course not. There's a great deal of work in it yet."

"I must wait before I judge, then. Dear me! Will you come out in the afternoon?"

"Yes, for the light won't be good then. Can't you go by yourself now? You disturb me jumping up and down, and I don't like people looking over my shoulder. Go and think of Mr Smith."

Thus the way was cleared, and the scene properly

prepared for, Lily's own hand drawing up the curtain.

Helen set out, slowly sauntering past the windows, then coming back to say in a laughing whisper that she was going to take the short cut, and as soon as she was out of sight, in the plantation, quickened her step to a brisk pace.

She no longer found the air oppressive. She was glowing with health and good humour when she came up to Mr Smith at the stile.

It was not quite twelve, but Mr Smith had been waiting there some minutes. His first glance ascertained that she was alone, and his spirits rose. Not a word was said by either about the sisters, and as their hands and eyes met, Helen saw all was right. Either he had not expected them, or he did not wish for them; whichever it was, it was plain that he had no misgivings, he had trusted the matter entirely in her hands. Every drawback was now removed, and the thing was to get away into the wood-path as quickly as possible.

He had already discovered the path, and wondered how it had hitherto escaped his observation.

They began to climb, rustling through the dead

leaves of the bank, and walking as fast as a good deal of hindrance, in the shape of wet and slippery ground, would permit, until a tolerably large-sized hillock was put between them and any chance observer on the road.

Then the pace slackened, and talking began.

Mr Smith spoke of the alterations and improvements he had been that morning superintending, and in which his companion showed a ready interest. She at once comprehended his satisfaction in pulling down uninhabitable cottages, and putting up in their place good solidly-built commodious ones. Her sympathy was called forth by his accounts of the discomforts, the positive degradations he had found his tenants enduring. She entered into his plans, his schemes, as if she had been a part of himself. He found himself talking to her as if they had a joint interest in the welfare of these people. In explaining his projects, he had nearly spoken of what "we" must do. Such curious similarity of tastes must be his apology. She really seemed as if all that he was about to do had been in her heart likewise. It was the most delightful encouragement.

"Mr Rodney tells me," said he, warming, "that

the people here are a warm-hearted, affectionate, grateful set. They are naturally disinclined to trust an utter stranger, but I expect we shall get on capitally by-and-by. I mean to get to know them personally, and that is only done by living among them. It seems to me both foolish and absolutely wrong to be responsible, in a great measure, for the welfare of one's fellow-creatures, and, to save trouble, leave it in the hands of agents who, as often as not, are unprincipled, and regardless of anything but making the most money they can out of them. I propose being as much as possible my own bailiff. At all events, my bailiff shall have no authority but what he gets from me."

To this she assented with an eagerness of approbation that made it plain these had long been her own sentiments.

"And going about among them one sees things as they really are—at least as far as can be seen," he went on. "They are not put before you in one light or another; they are just plain facts, about which you must use your own judgment, under the Divine direction, and then, come what may, you have done your duty."

Yes, certainly, and that was all that was required of one, acting for the best; but the "Divine direction," rather startled her. He must be a religious man. She was not sure that she was quite prepared for that. Still it was a blessing he was not a dissenter. If—if anything came of it, she would be allowed to make her deep curtsey in church all the same.

"I think," said he next, "I must get Lord Sauffrenden to give me a few hints about the drainage. His land, I am told, is by far the best drained of any in the county. He has been doing it lately on some new system."

This was far better. Lord Sauffrenden and drainage were more in accordance with her views than Mr Rodney and cottages. She could not indeed appear to be at home in this matter, but that was not needed. She could question, and be instructed, and show sympathy. And then she could draw him on to speak about the house. The house was all very well, but the absence of an approach on the south side was an inconvenience. He was meditating opening up one through the woods; he had his eye on a family who were the very people to put in-

to a lodge. He meant to have a couple of new lodges.

She could not do more than listen to this. She could hardly as yet show approval of new lodges. They had it, however. Several fine views of the house were obtained from the path, and at each one she felt increasingly better inclined to be the mistress of it.

Mr Smith in his turn was charmed with the wood-path. It led through by far the most beautiful part of the grounds. He must have it attended to, not spoilt by being made too trim, but clear of rubbish, and gravelled.

The gravel was suggested by frequent difficulties. There were places so soft from recent rain that they were only to be crossed by scrambling up the bank, and holding on by the bushes.

Helen appeared to her usual advantage here. She disdained assistance, stepped hither and thither, held back the branches for him, found her own way, and jumped the bank to admiration.

"There is another bad part in front, I am afraid," said he, when they had just struggled on to firm ground again. "I am afraid, Miss Tolleton, we shall have to go up the side again."

"Not if the stepping-stones are there still. Look, it is all right, there they are, and they go right through the worst."

She sprang from one to another, he following less nimbly.

"Now that is the last of them, and it is quite dry the rest of the way. All the water runs down here from the heights, you see. There are no more bad places."

"You seem to know the way well?"

"I used to come here often, alone."

"I wish I had been here then."

"In that case perhaps I should not have come."

"You certainly would not have come alone."

"Would you have come with me, Mr Smith?"

"If you would have allowed me, Miss Tolleton."

They were laughing into each other's faces. The charm was beginning to work.

"Oh, what ferns!" cried she next, "what beautiful ferns! I must have some of those ferns, please."

Of course he liked cutting them, she standing by his side, receiving them as they were gathered. Then he wanted to give her more than her hands would hold. Then she was saucy, and threw away

some which she declared he had spoilt. They were beautiful ones, but he had been very careless, and had not cut them properly, and he must do it better another time. They took up a root together. Then they agreed it was not worth carrying home. Then she said it was he who had said so, and he affirmed he was sure she thought it.

A great deal of time passed, and still they had not got to the view. Mr Smith had almost forgotten what he had been brought there to see. It took him unawares, and he was surprised into great admiration and delight.

For some time the little path had been getting steeper and steeper, but there had been no signs of an opening in the woods. Suddenly it emerged on a small plateau, evidently cleared by art; and it appeared this was the end.

On every side it was surrounded by trees. Beneath were cliffs so perpendicular as to form a dangerous precipice, terminating as they did in a bushy incline, at the bottom of which rolled the river.

Beyond the river were lanes, fields, and hedgerows; dotted here and there with red-tiled farmhouses half-

hidden by ivy, the growth of years, and nestling in their ample stackyards.

In the distance the blue smoke of a town with its cathedral tower, could dimly be discerned against the sky.

Helen turned to her companion with a sense of proud proprietorship. "What do you think of it? Have I exaggerated?"

"Indeed no, it is all that you promised me. It is beautiful—perfectly beautiful, a true English landscape with all its best suggestions. How shall I thank you for the pleasure this has given me? But for you, who knows how long I might have remained in ignorance that such a spot existed?"

"And look, that is all they have done for it!" said she, pointing to the rude bench which had fallen to the ground on one side, and was evidently in the last stage of decay.

"One had almost better make a seat of the rocks," sitting down as she spoke.

"There shall be a summer-house," said Mr Smith, looking round, "where that seat is now. It will be a pleasure to me to design it myself. Anything that you can suggest, you may depend on seeing carried out."

Helen felt her triumph. It was not on the words, however, that she placed dependence. "Words really mean very little," was her private judgment, "it is the look and the manner which mean everything." Mr Smith's look and manner were animated, and she felt sure she was gaining ground.

He sat down upon the rocks beside her, and they exhausted the subject of the summer-house. Helen then entered on a topic she had earnestly desired to open the evening before, but durst not, lest the unguarded speeches of her father or sisters might show what she desired to conceal. She wished to hear about Sauffrenden.

"You have not told me anything about your dinner-party on Friday," she began, "and in our quiet neighbourhood we like to know everything about everybody."

"It was a very dull dinner-party."

"Well, but that says nothing; you must tell me who were there, and all about it, and then I can estimate the dulness."

"The Rector was there, and Miss Gray. Admiral and Miss Fulton. And an old Lady Wranch or Wrench, an aunt of Lord Sauffrenden's, I believe; and several others I did not know."

"Why, I think you were pretty well off. The Fultons are pleasant people."

"I had never met them before; but they seem so, certainly."

"And who had you to take in to dinner, if it is a fair question?"

"I had Miss Fulton."

"Then, Mr Smith, you were well off. She is a most amusing and agreeable companion. Do you not think so?"

"Amusing, certainly."

"And agreeable? Every one thinks her agreeable."

"Yes, agreeable in a certain degree. But perhaps she is almost too agreeable to be completely so. If you know what I mean, though it is invidious to point out such a defect, she has rather too much agreeability."

"You are severe. Can a woman be too agreeable?"

"Certainly not, but she can try to be so too much."

"And is that all poor Miss Fulton's crime?"

"Yes, that is all. I liked what I saw of Miss

Fulton very much; but if I must say so, she talks too fast, and too loud; and, may I dare to add, too much?"

"Oh, Mr Smith!"

She was not quite certain what to say. She had no idea he would prove so particular.

"Too much," said she, thoughtfully; "I wonder if I do." From the bottom of her heart the words came; she was no more coquetting than if she had been in her own room alone.

The answer was as quick as thought. "You? No, indeed."

She blushed crimson. How provoking that she should have appeared to be seeking this! As if she had deigned to angle for a compliment! Appealed for flattery which could not but be paid. It was too stupid of her. And he had said it so earnestly, so emphatically, that he must have thought it was what she wanted. She sprang from her seat, vexation on her brow.

He rose also, surprised at the sudden cloud. "You are not angry with me, Miss Tolleton?" Angry? Her bright smile shone out again, "*You! No, indeed.*" All was right.

There was more dallying on the way home. More difficulties in getting over the muddy places. More holding on by the branches.

The chit-chat began again, and all too soon the stile came in view.

Simultaneously they looked to see if the road were free. It was quite free, although Maria and Clare Hunt had traversed it backwards and forwards several times in the interval in hopes of meeting Captain Wellwood. Mr Smith helped his companion over the stile, and they paused to say good-bye.

Helen put the ferns into her left hand. "Next time," said he, taking her right, "that you and I come here together, I hope it will be to inspect the new summer-house." Not much in the words, but they were suggestive.

"And now," said Helen to herself, as she walked swiftly through the plantation, "how much and how little of this shall I give them the benefit of? If I told the whole, Lily would be ridiculous. She must never know it was arranged beforehand, and I must be careful how I show that I really think he is touched. So then, we met accidentally, and walked together; shall I say where? Yes, for it will come

out about the summer-house. Whatever I tell her, however, she must be made to hold her tongue about."

Then she fell to musing on what had passed. His words, his looks, were dwelt upon, and weighed in the balance. How much meaning could she safely attach to them? How far could she calculate upon him? That he admired her, was interested in her up to a certain point, she felt certain; but was the amount sufficient to bring him to her feet? Not yet. The result of her meditations was this—not yet.

Luncheon was over, and the sisters eagerly speculating on the chances of Helen's luck having again thrown Mr Smith in her way. It was two o'clock when she entered the house. She had no idea it was so late, and, smiling, bade them wait for her adventures until she had satisfied her appetite.

"Adventures! Then you had adventures!" cried Lily. "Here is your chop; we put it to the fire at once, so it is only tepid; and the potatoes are on the bar. What adventures? I do believe it was Mr Smith!"

"And here is your porter," said Carry. I didn't pour it out, in case you would rather have some-

thing else for your headache. If you would, I'll finish the porter myself."

"Let us ring for another bottle, Carry," said Lily. "I'll share it with you, for my back aches with sitting so long at those leaves. They are a great success though, Helen. But now, what adventures? Do begin. You can talk and eat too."

"No, I can't;" teazing a little was what Helen enjoyed. "But I shall be ready directly. I met somebody, Lily."

"I know you did! Mr Smith! Another small bottle of porter, please"—(to Corker).

"I do wish you would take more care before the servants," frowned her sister. "Corker must have heard."

"No, nonsense. And what if he did? He may hear me say it a hundred times if he likes. Mr Smith! Mr Smith! Mr Smith! There now, Nelly; if you won't tell me, I'll tell myself. Now you had better begin, or I shall inform him outright. Here he comes."

She restrained herself, however, whilst the porter was being poured out, and as she had done so, Helen began as soon as they were again alone.

"Well, if you will be quiet, I'll tell you. Yes, it was Mr Smith—(I knew it!) And I have been with him for the last two hours!"

The effect of this announcement was rapture. "Oh, you dear good creature, then you really *are!* Oh, what fun! What would Mrs Hunt say? You sly thing, why did you not tell us before? And now for the how, when, and where."

"At the stile, in the short cut. You told me to go and think of him, you know, so it was that which conjured him up."

"But what was he doing there?"

"Waiting for me, apparently. At least, it seemed as if he had nothing else to do, for he was at my service directly."

There is no blind like the truth spoken in jest. Lily was taken in at once.

"Well?"

"Then we set off together, but you will never guess where."

"To the house?"

"The house! What can you be thinking of? As if I could have gone to the house!"

"Why not? I thought, of course, it was there,"

in a disappointed tone. "There is no other particular place to go to. I thought he had been showing you over the house."

"And you thought I would have gone? Lily, you really are too absurd. I told you not to go on so fast, and you go faster and faster. I wonder, instead of thinking I had been to the house, you did not imagine I had been to the church! You seem to expect that to be the next thing."

"It will come to that," said Lily, readily. "But where did you go to, then?"

"To the view."

"The view?"

"Yes. Was that not a particular place?"

"And what did you talk about?" inquired Carry, opening her lips for the first time since Mr Smith's name had been mentioned, but still relenting towards the subject, since it became plain the thing was to be.

"All sorts of things. Improvements, cottages, Mr Rodney, drainage, and dirt."

"You talked of those?" said Lily, incredulously.

"Indeed I did, and talked beautifully; but as they don't suit your carnal mind, perhaps it will

please you better to hear that we also talked of Lord Sauffrenden, and of two new lodges, and an approach through the woods.

"Very good; but that is not what I want to hear about, all the same."

"Do you want to hear about the summer-house?"

"What summer-house?"

"A summer-house at the view. There, you will like that; and when the summer-house is there, he shall give us some fun at it."

Lily looked at her sister shrewdly. "Was it to please you?"

"Well, yes, in a way. To please himself, too. And the path is to be gravelled, which will be a great improvement. I never saw it so bad as it was to-day."

"And when is it to be done; not till summer, I suppose?"

"It is to be begun to-morrow."

"Then, Helen, he *is* thinking of you."

CHAPTER XI.

AN OLD FRIEND IS A YOUNG MAN.

AFTER all this, it was really too delightful when Mrs Hunt bridled and looked mysterious, saying that if it was either, it was Maria.

We have now come up to the point when she paid her afternoon visit at Freelands, and fell a prey to the girls' love of fun and ridicule. Lily only concealed her enjoyment by leaving the room, and even Helen, demurely as she sat at her visitor's feet, was obliged to cast down her eyes.

Mrs Hunt had untied her bonnet strings, and taken off her shawl, and altogether behaved on this visit in a more friendly way than she had ever done before at the Tolletons. She had called the day after their little entertainment, on purpose to let them know that Mr Smith had been there. It was a week after the Tolletons' own dinner-party, and

her third essay to secure him had had the luck usually assigned to that number.

Neither Maria nor Clare were with her; they had gone to the Rectory, but would take the short cut, and join their mother in time to accompany her home. It had been Mrs Hunt's plan. She wished to have the best part of her visit by herself; to be able to throw out pregnant suggestions which might rankle in the Tolletons' bosoms, to plant seeds of doubt and apprehension which must in due time bear the proper fruit of hopeless despair. If Maria had been with her, this might not have been so easy.

This was, however, only a part of her mission. Like other great ambassadors she had her apparent and her non-apparent business. She had to learn as well as to communicate.

If Maria's simple attractions had really and truly defeated, by their simplicity, the lures of these wily ladies, they would surely by this time have found it out. She thought at least they would, but she would fain be certain. She wished to discover how much they suspected; she wondered if it were possible that they could have suspected nothing.

In that case her task would be easy and delight-

ful. She would enlighten them with all the delicacy in the world; but gently as she would plant the arrow, it should be poisoned. If they really still imagined they were going to have it all their own way with Mr Smith, it was only her duty to open their eyes. She little knew whom she had to deal with. It is true that on other occasions the Miss Tolletons had not been as reticent as perhaps prudence demanded, with regard to their love matters. They would freely tell who came six days in the week, and who seven. They made confidences and confessions, with heedless prodigality.

But now they were wise. They knew Mr Smith. Instead of increasing his attentions, any remarks coming to his ears were, Helen felt convinced, more likely to put a stop to them altogether.

He was not aware of having paid any; nor, indeed, strictly speaking, had he. She owned to herself without a blush that, so far, the outside he had done had been to receive hers. She had therefore warned her sisters to be circumspect, and as they both now entertained high hopes of a serious ending to what had begun in jest, they were prepared to be

obedient to whatever her penetration and knowledge of the subject should dictate.

Accordingly Mrs Hunt was ill prepared for the line of action decided upon.

Miss Tolleton would not allow that they had seen anything of him. They fancied he was away from home. Papa and he were great friends when he was at home, and they all thought him such a very nice old gentleman. However, she must not say "old" to Mrs Hunt, perhaps. There were whispers which she must not mention—must not disturb her with. Had she not heard? Was it possible she had not heard? But then people always were the last to hear anything about themselves. It was just as well. Mrs Hunt must not press her; because, if she did, it would be sure to slip out; she never could keep secrets. No, she would not tell if she could help it; Mrs Hunt would be vexed. People would talk—it was vain to try and stop them. If there was nothing in it, the report would die out of itself.

Mrs Hunt, with burning cheeks, begged at least to hear the report. It was hard if the report had anything to do with her and hers, that she might not

even hear it. She put her hand on her young friend's head as she spoke, and her tone was quite affectionately pathetic.

Helen played with her rings. She really did not know. She did so dislike gossip. At any rate, Mrs Hunt must not be angry with *her*. She must understand that none of them had ever given the slightest countenance to the story. Their answer had invariably been, that if there were any truth in it, they could trust Maria and Clare to bring the news to Freelands themselves. Of course, till that was done, they could never think of making inquiries. Of all things, they would shun being thought intrusive. However, if Mrs Hunt would promise——it was about Mr Smith.

Then indeed Mrs Hunt felt that she had done the girls injustice. Helen's voice was music in her ears.

About Mr Smith, and one—report did not say which—of the Miss Hunts. All she wanted to say was, that they might rely on her and her sisters' discretion; the subject should never be alluded to before any one, if Mrs Hunt would just say so much, was it Maria?

Poor Mrs Hunt! How elated was her crest!

How well, and modestly, she thought she did her part!

The many iniquities of Freelands were condoned, the sisters for the time were almost as much to her as to her daughters. Helen had never been looking better. What a handsome creature she was, and how improved in manner! Her attention had been quite wonderful, and she had sat and chatted with her for nearly an hour before the girls came in, as pleasantly as possible. Yes, she would own she could be as agreeable as anybody when she chose.

This was for Maria and Clare going home.

"Lily seemed in great spirits," observed Clare, thoughtfully. She had remarked that, on the occasion of their disturbing the afternoon tea-party at Freelands, Lily had been next Captain Wellwood.

"Oh, she's a silly creature that's always in spirits," said her mother, in whose eyes Lily had not gone up so high as the others. "She's one of those that can't help laughing when there's nothing in the world to laugh at. Once or twice when we were sitting talking quite quietly, Helen and I, she began to smirk and giggle, as if one of us had said something ridiculous. It's a bad habit to get into, as I have always warned

you two. I must say that, for Helen, she is by far the best behaved of any of them. I'm really astonished Mr Smith does not admire her!"

"Carry was very good to you, too, mamma," said Clare, with a quick suppressing glance at Maria, who she feared was about to commit herself.

"Yes, Carry was civil enough; but she is not so good-natured as Helen. Helen says very pretty things. I must say I had a nice visit, and I really think the girls much improved."

"My dear," as soon as she got home, "I do think those Tolleton girls are improved. We had quite a pleasant time there this afternoon. Helen made me take off my things, and settle myself comfortably; and she and I sat and chatted away till the girls came. I assure you I was quite surprised to see them—the time had passed so quickly."

"You must have been deep in your neighbour's affairs, Polly. Come, now, what tit-bit of scandal had the fair ladies picked up for you to-day, that you were quite of one mind about? Who has been committing some atrocious delinquency, exceeding even themselves? Or what have you learnt new about Mr Smith?"

"Oh fie, doctor—to think such a thing! Can't I have a pleasant afternoon without your talking that nonsense? Mr Smith, indeed! I am not likely to learn much of Mr Smith at Freelands, from what I hear. They thought he was away from home. Anything new about Mr Smith will have to come from another quarter, I suspect. Girls, go and take off your things, if you don't want to be late for tea."

"It was about Mr Smith, all the same, however," said she, as soon as the door closed. "You are so sharp, my dear, there's no putting you off. Well, what do you think? It's all over the place that he's after Maria!"

Looking at her triumphant face, a smile gradually irradiated his.

"Do you really mean to say so?"

"Indeed I do! and on the very best authority—though you will hardly believe me—Helen Tolleton herself. Now I'll tell you what I think. Of course it must have been pepper and vinegar to their proud stomachs, after the open way they went after him—Helen in particular; and that makes it all the more certain. She wouldn't wish to believe it, you know, as long as she could possibly help; but she has got

the sense to see the thing is done, and wishes to put a bold face on it."

"Will they try to put Maria off him, do you think?"

"If they do I'll be even with them. But no, they won't. I do think they have a sort of kindly feeling for our girls; and if Maria became Mrs Smith, they reckon they would be up at the Hill all day long. A fine thing for them; they would make good use of her. No, I don't think they would wish to put her off him. If he doesn't take up with themselves, I do believe they would as soon Maria had him as anybody."

"And what had Miss Helen to say about it? Where had she picked it up, I wonder?"

"She wouldn't name names; but I suspect it had come from more quarters than one. Their meetings in the village, she said, and Maria using the short cut. However it was I said it was Maria—that is to say"—alarmed at her husband's face—"she said it was one, and begged to know which. So I said I was sure *we* had never thought of such a thing, and had never noticed anything particular from Mr Smith to either; but that if it *was* either, it was Maria."

"I would not have said it—I would not indeed. I wonder, Polly, at your committing yourself to that. Now it will be set about everywhere that we told them it was Maria."

Care sat upon the doctor's brow, in spite of his wife's soothing.

"Oh no, it won't, Robert. You needn't fear. That Helen is a good-natured creature on the whole; and she begged so hard, and promised so faithfully not to tell. She would hardly tell me, till I made her. She seemed to be quite afraid I would be put out. I told her idle reports never put *me* out, and made believe I put no faith in it. I daresay she thinks we have many such. But I said I wouldn't have it repeated to the girls. She promised me that."

"She mayn't repeat it to the girls, but she may to worse people. However, it cannot be helped now; I only hope it won't get round to Smith. They would never go to him with it, eh?"

"That you may be quite easy about, my dear. From Helen's whole way of talking, I am convinced they see very little of him. I could almost take my oath they have never met since we found him there that afternoon."

"Why, you told me he dined with them last week."

"I took it for granted his Monday engagement was to them, but I am rather inclined to think I was mistaken. Neither he nor they ever said so, you know. I fancy one or other of them would, if it had been the case."

"You think he is quite off there, then?"

"If he ever was on. Perhaps I was rather hasty, but I must say it appeared at first as if they were tooth and nail after him. It might have been only their flirting ways. They never can let a man pass, be he what he may, as old as an owl, and as ugly as a hippopotamus. However, whether that was all or not, it's plain he never had any thought of them; and I'm bound to say Helen gave me the impression to-day, that there never was, nor had been, anything between them."

Which was exactly the impression Helen intended to give.

She knew—who better?—that Mr Smith was not away. If he had been, how could he have brought down that delicious little plan of the summer-house for her inspection, the very day before? And how

could she have accompanied him to the edge of the plantation, when he went away? And how could he have been obliged to go away sooner than he need otherwise have done, because he was going to meet an old friend at the station? And how could they be expecting him to bring the old friend to luncheon the very day after Mrs Hunt's call? No, no; he was safe at home. And Miss Helen, it was rather a risky story; you ought to have ascertained at least that Mrs Hunt had not caught a glimpse of the grey hat on its way through the plantation, or laid hold of its wearer elsewhere, and wormed the truth out of him.

Mr Smith, in his integrity, would have seen no reason either for evasion or concealment. It might have been a bad business.

Nothing of the kind, however, had happened, and she thought no harm was done. She was bright and confident, and spruced herself up gaily for the old gentleman's luncheon next day.

Early in the morning she had reminded Carry of Mr Smith's foreign residence, and suggested the propriety of a few made-up dishes. Papa was told to stay at home and make himself fit for company;

and punctually at half-past one o'clock the company arrived.

Mr Smith had talked of an old friend, and the sisters had concluded he meant one of his own contemporaries. They were rather taken aback, in consequence, when a slender elegantly-formed young man, whose age certainly could not exceed thirty-five, followed him into the room, and was named as Sir George Lorrimer.

Miss Tolleton had nothing to regret. She knew Sir George by name, and knew that there was a Lady Lorrimer. She was proud of Mr Smith's acquaintance, and pleased that he should wish to make his, theirs. She was seen to the best advantage. Beautiful, graceful, hospitable, unembarrassed, her manners just what they ought to be. Sir George was caught, "By Jove!"

When first told that he was going to a Mr Tolleton's, a neighbour's, to luncheon, he had wished Mr Tolleton at the bottom of the sea. A country lout who would drag him out to inspect his farming, his pigs, and his poultry. Mr Smith's remarking that the young ladies were reputed beauties mended the case a little; but it was not until he had seen the eldest

daughter, that he gave over considering the engagement an unmitigated bore.

The other sisters were not worth looking at.

Poor Carry! poor Lily! The truth was, they had not changed their dresses. Mrs Hunt's eulogium on their neatness might be just, but they looked dowdy beside their brilliant sister. Lily had laughed at Helen for taking so much trouble, but she now earnestly wished she had done the same. And Helen had urged her to do it, said it was very little trouble, that a black silk never got harmed, and that it looked odd for one to change and not the others.

For this the others had their answer. Why then did she do it? She had looked quite nice before, and her beautiful lace square and sleeves would certainly not keep clean long if they were to be worn on every such occasion. Mr Smith would have liked her just as well as she was. There had been a little tiff between the two parties, harmlessly ending in each taking their own way.

Miss Tolleton had coiled her hair afresh, and put on the new dress, and a band of scarlet velvet round her throat. Lily contented herself with a clean collar, and washing her hands. Carry, after the tiff

was over, forgot all about it, and the luncheon-party besides; and was caught in the drawing-room just as she was.

The consciousness of this, joined to the usual unavailing regrets, confused the two culprits, and the evidence the new-comer was not slow to give of his considering them inferior, altogether quelled them. Sir George, in fact, imagined they were still in the schoolroom. They had entirely the look of two blooming awkward school-girls. They seated themselves at table without a word, and even Lily remained nearly mute the whole time of luncheon.

Helen came out all the better for the dull background. She and her father had plenty to say, and she, at least, said it well. With Mr Smith they seemed on the easiest terms. Sir George observed with a little surprise the animation with which his fair neighbour addressed his friend. For him were her sparkling sallies, her playful repartees. For him several retrospective allusions which seemed enigmas to the rest. Her opinion was sought in return, and her wishes consulted.

It appeared as if they understood each other. He looked at Miss Tolleton once or twice, and after con-

sidering that she was a lively girl as well as a pretty one, it suddenly dawned upon him that she was a clever one too.

This must be looked into. He delighted to unravel a scheme, to pick out the kernel of a secret. It was something worth coming for; it gave an interest to the day. Had they not been expected at the Castle, he would have liked to remain a little after luncheon; to spend the afternoon, in fact. They were expected, however, and had promised to call early, not to keep any one at home.

"Nice chatty little woman, Lady Sauffrenden," said Sir George.

"We don't know her," replied Helen, calmly.

So much Mr Smith had by this time become aware of. No one had assigned any reason, or indeed had openly stated the fact; but he had discovered the fact, and longed to know the reason.

If Miss Tolleton had appeared confused, had tried to slur it over, had offered any excuse, all would have been plain; but her quiet "We don't know her," made all the "don't knowing" appear to be on their side. It had now the aspect of a good, honest, neighbourly quarrel.

When Helen asked Captain Wellwood after Lady Sauffrenden's health in that thoughtful manner before mentioned, it was merely for the sake of relieving an awkwardness. She had no thought of blinding him. She had no intention of deceiving Mr Smith. Philip, she knew, was already aware how it was, and Mr Smith soon would be. The affectionate inquiry had answered its end, but now the subject must be treated differently.

Sir George, as well as Mr Smith, took it as she intended.

"A peppery little person, you know," said the former, confidentially, afterwards. "She always did like to have the high hand, and I daresay gets Sauffrenden into hot water sometimes. What a good fellow he is! I never knew a better fellow in my life."

"I always thought there was something," said Mr Smith, reverting to the Tolletons. "It was never said, but I felt sure there was. I have heard Miss Tolleton ask most kindly after Lady Sauffrenden, but I could not gather from that, whether they were acquainted or not."

"*That* was very plainly said to-day, however.

Perhaps the little woman objects to having such attractions too frequently at the Castle. No, not on any particular account, of course; but you know it is a fact that the pretty creatures positively *can't* like each other, however much they try."

"That is one of your abominable notions, which you try to pawn off on other people. It is not a fact to me. You must find some other reason."

"'Pon my word, I can't. Sauffrenden's no dangler, or I should say he had been——"

"No, no, Lorrimer, that won't pass either."

"Then, depend upon it, Mr Tolleton's cat has been hunting the woods and got trapped."

"That is far more likely."

"Or his dog killed a pheasant."

"More likely still."

"Or he hands the plate too regularly at church; or he objects to smoking in the railway carriage; or—or—his daughter is too pretty by half."

This Mr Smith vehemently denied.

Carry and Lily revenged themselves for their enforced retirement into the shade as soon as Freelands was itself again. "Helen, you told us he said an old friend."

"So he did; those were his words. How could I tell any more than you that the old friend would prove a young man? You'll wish now you had done as I asked you about your black silks."

"But who would ever have guessed," said Lily, in an injured voice, "that an old fusty Mr Smith—I beg your pardon, Nelly, but it is the truth—that he should have had a friend like that?"

"And a baronet to boot!"

"I rather wondered you did not waver in your allegiance, my dear. I gave you great credit for not transferring your *petits soins* at once to the new aspirant."

"Aspirant! Nonsense!"

"You chose to consider him such, whether he was or not—I knew by your way."

"If you knew so well," said her sister, nettled, "it is a pity you did not know a little better. There is a Lady Lorrimer."

"How did you find that out? I don't believe it."

"Believe it or not, as you like. You might have heard Mr Smith talk of her if you had kept your ears open."

"Open they must have been indeed, for I never

come within a hundred yards when you are talking, on purpose to be out of the way."

"Well, there is, then; she was one of the Albuts."

"Is he come to stay?"

"That I don't know. I tell you I did not know he was coming. I had no idea it was to be he. The only thing I do know is that he has a wife."

"I don't think it was fair in Mr Smith to bring a man of that stamp to any one's house without warning. Of course we are not like great folks. Did you see the shudder he gave at the singed pudding?"

"Oh, Carry, that reminds me. You must speak to the cook about that pudding. It was horrible, and Mr Smith would eat it."

"Why did you not stop him?"

"He had got it on his plate before it was discovered, and then he persisted in finishing it."

"I can't think what made her do it, I am sure," said Carry. "Stupid woman! The rest was all so nice. If only Mr Smith had had the sense not to break it, the singed smell never would have come out. It was close to me all the time, and I had a suspicion there was something nasty. It was very faint, and no one else would have known.

What made him take pudding at all? He should have taken jelly, if he took anything. Very few men touch sweet things at luncheon."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter; everything else was good. Nothing could have passed off better. And now I wonder what he will go and say of us at the Castle!"

"I don't believe he will mention us."

"And I believe he will, the first thing."

CHAPTER XII.

I THOUGHT IT WOULD NEVER END!

HELEN was right. Sir George did mention them, and very nearly, if not quite the first thing.

He declined luncheon on the ground of having had luncheon. They had just come from having it with some pretty neighbours of theirs; and then, before he could say the name, Lord Sauffrenden's face showed that he at least had divined it.

There was silence directly it was spoken, and the inevitable guilty Tolleton air stole over several of the company. On Philip Wellwood, who was having a day's shooting at the Castle, and on the host himself, it was most visible, but a shadow of it tainted even Mr Smith. Sir George Lorrimer and Lady Sauffrenden alone were unmoved.

Sir George went on with all the unreservedness of a stranger. "What a handsome girl the eldest

is! She is the eldest, is she not — or are there others?"

How busy Lord Sauffrenden was feeding Gyp, and how suddenly Captain Wellwood became interested in the belt of his powder-flask! Mr Smith, to whom the question had not been put, was obliged to take it as if it had.

There were no signs of any sort of reply to be got from the little autocrat who held them all in check, and whose head merely reared in the faintest possible manner backwards, to show that, had she done as she liked, she would have tossed it. How should she know if there were three Miss Tolletons, or three hundred? It was a subject to which she had never given a thought. Thus much she would have said, if she had said anything. As it was, she merely looked the questioner full in the face, and then turned her long neck slowly towards Mr Smith. The inquiry could not possibly have been meant for her.

Mr Smith was thus obliged to receive it. His answer was, "No, I never heard of any."

"I suppose you see a great deal of them?" Sir George addressed her pointedly. "They must be

your nearest neighbours, unless you are unusually well off."

"Yes—no; There are none nearer. But really we are very independent of other people. We don't see much of anybody. Sauffrenden and I are a very humdrum couple."

"Yes, indeed," he corroborated, eagerly. "We are often weeks without anything going on at all. You must come down and wake us up, Lorrimer. Mr Smith will think us a dreadfully slow set of folks."

They were now, he thought, off the Tolleton quicksands.

"I have not seen much slowness as yet," said Sir George. "I should not say slowness prevailed in the house we were at to-day, eh, Smith?"

Mr Smith smiled his assent.

"The pretty one had plenty to say for herself, hadn't she? You and she were great friends."

Cruel man! How thoroughly he enjoyed saying it!

"Which do you call the pretty one?" said Captain Wellwood, carelessly. "They all set up to be that, you know."

"No, do they? I hardly looked at the others.

By-and-by, perhaps, they may be, but they are barely fledged yet."

"Oh, indeed they are. The second at least, was out before I was married," said Sauffrenden, with a look at his wife, meant to convey, "There, you see, *I* don't stick up for them."

"You are not a very old married man yet, Sauffrenden; but to be out at all, they certainly are young looking. Sweet seventeen, I should have guessed them. You don't consider *them* beauties?" to Lady Sauffrenden.

"I hardly know them by sight, only by passing them sometimes when I am driving." "Haughty little sinner!" thought Sir George. "As jealous as she can be, and puts on these airs to hide it. They become her, too. She never looked better."

"Well, but Miss Tolleton? You must have met Miss Tolleton? Won't you allow her something, Lady Sauffrenden? I assure you I was quite subjugated, and as for Smith, there was no spirit left in him."

Every one looked at Mr Smith now. Sauffrenden and Philip were unable to keep their eyes off him, and even the lady stole a glance of inquiry.

Unconscious of all, he answered laughing, "Really, Lorrimer, if that is to be the way, I must be careful how I take you there again. I had no idea you were made of such inflammable matter."

"Inflammable? To be sure I am. So inflammable, that at one-and-twenty I was set on fire and devastated like the prairies, to make me safe ever afterwards. I'm perfectly harmless now. But you, you would burn like a tinder-box."

"I have been a long time about it, then."

"Getting drier and drier, just like the prairies. How the fire will rage when once the match is struck! What do you think, Lady Sauffrenden? Is it not rather dangerous for this good friend of mine to have planted his wigwam so near, so very near, to a certain pair of bright eyes?"

"That, I think, may be left to himself," replied she, trying to speak with moderation. "At least," she added, turning to him with a sweet, sudden smile, "*we* shall be at no pains to send him further away."

"That was well done, and she is good to him at all events," thought Sir George. "But I must make one more shot."

Aloud: "Well, then, I suppose he is to be left to

his fate, for better for worse! But," to his hostess again, "the fair Helen appears to be no friend of yours?"

"I should be sorry to say she was."

"Indeed? Now I should have thought you were cut out for each other. Two such charming people ought to be seen together, if only for the benefit of others."

"But I am not charming, Sir George, and I know nothing of Miss Tolleton's charms. Pray let us be content to keep apart."

The little lady snapped the thread in her netting-needle as she spoke. Her husband hastened to mediate.

"Seriously, Milly, this is nothing to laugh about. We shall begin to suspect Sir George's devastation, if he goes on at this rate. I shall send Lady Lorrimer a telegram in private. Helen is a dangerous girl."

"She is, indeed," emphatically.

("Oh, confound it! What will Smith think?")

"It won't do, you see, Lorrimer. They hate each other like poison, those two. They would never assimilate if they lived a hundred years."

Lady Sauffrenden burnt with indignation. Hate

each other! Such a way of putting it! Each other! As if they were exactly equal. What a shame it was of Sauffrenden! How could he say such a thing, knowing all the time, as well as possible, how it was? She lost her head and her temper now, and spoke unadvisedly.

"I really don't know what you can possibly mean, Sauffrenden. As to hating—I have never spoken to Miss Tolleton in my life; I never wish to speak to her. I do not like what I hear of them, and I don't choose to know them, and that is all." Hating! It was too ridiculous; letting her down before these men like that. She could have boxed her husband's ears.

"Heyday! Milly! 'Pon my word, you take high ground, my little woman. But I daresay Miss Tolleton feels the same. Eh, Philip? Confess now, you know them—isn't it so?"

("Smith will be furious if she goes on like this. It is enough to make him cut us dead.")

Philip would not allow he had ever heard Miss Tolleton speak of Lady Sauffrenden at all. Except —yes, once lately to ask after her health. "Have you been ill?" inquired Sir George.

"No, thank you, I have been quite well. I am very much obliged to Miss Tolleton."

"There he goes!" groaned her husband inwardly, as the merciless baronet still pursued the subject. "Why can't he take the hint? Thick-headed idiot!"

"Then, my dear Lady Sauffrenden, you are the very person to keep watch over my friend here. He is not to be trusted; indeed he is not, I assure you. You and Sauffrenden——"

"No, no, not I, Sir George," interposed he, with a quick short laugh; "I will have nothing to do with it. For my part, I am a great admirer of the fair Helen. I beg to decline the office."

Lady Sauffrenden lifted her eyes in astonishment. She had seldom seen her husband so angry in her life. What could so suddenly have roused him?

"Oh, you are, are you?" said Sir George. "Then here is Captain Wellwood."

"Most happy," said Philip, indifferently; "anything to please. Mr Smith, suppose we go there to-morrow?"

So they were all against her—even Philip now. Her husband defiant, Sir George contemptuous, Philip setting her at nought, and Mr Smith gravely dis-

pleased. Her heart swelled at the thought. Had she not had cause to be indignant? Was not she the one aggrieved? Everybody, by turns, had tried to vex her, and then, when she was stung into saying more than perhaps she should, they took advantage of it. To think she was jealous! Jealous of that girl! Had she ever denied her beauty? She had never once given any one the slightest grounds for supposing she denied it. She was pretty, of course —she was exceedingly pretty; it would be absurd to call her anything else. But that did not make her nice; and certainly it did not make her a fit companion for her.

And then for Sauffrenden to go and say he was a great admirer, just as if he went and flirted with her —he who had never spoken to any one of them in his life. He must have been reckless when he said it. It was such a story too. But then she remembered his angry laugh, and wondered what had caused it. If she could only see him alone.

But for this she had to wait. They went out and she was left by herself. Wearily the afternoon passed, and the tea-tray waited till the tea was cold, ere they came in.

"I have ordered the pony-carriage, Milly," said her husband; "and, if you like, I thought you might drive Mr Smith and Sir George back. Phil and I are just going out for another hour, so I won't wait."

She looked at him yearningly. He came up and kissed her, and put his hand on her shoulder. They all seemed in better spirits. She alone had had nothing to cheer hers.

"Go and put on your things, dear."

"Can I pick you up anywhere, Sauffrenden?"

"No, no, never mind us. At least you might come to the Hislops' cottage about half-past five—but it will be too late for you to be out then, I daresay. However, come if you like, but don't wait for us."

Wait she would, however, if it were an hour.

The two sportsmen hurried out. The light was too precious to be wasted, and they were not allowed to be ceremonious.

"Well, Philip? Eh? Well?" cried Sauffrenden, as soon they were alone. "What did you think of that for a scene? Ha! ha! ha! I can laugh at it now, but it was *dreadful*, wasn't it? I could have sunk into the very earth for shame! That fool Lorrimer! And my wife making it worse every

time she opened her lips! I thought it would never end! I thought we should never get off without a regular blow-up! I did not know which way to look."

"Or whether to laugh or to cry."

"No, hang it! I never felt less like laughing in my life!"

"And then you appealed to me."

"My dear fellow, I would have appealed to—well, we won't say who, himself! I never was in such a strait! There was Milly, on the one hand, with her solemn face, and Lorrimer thinking it was all a joke, and Smith looking from one to the other; but he is enlightened as to one thing now, at all events. He is no longer in ignorance of Lady Sauffrenden's feelings on the subject. I mean to speak to Milly. I was disgusted at that part of it. It's enough to put him off."

"He must not be much worth, if it is."

"Oh, I don't know." Lord Sauffrenden naturally regarded his wife's favour as of great importance. "Nobody could like it. And Lorrimer all unsuspecting."

"Do you think he was so unsuspecting?"

"If he was not, it was a shabby thing to do. But no, Smith is his friend, and he would not wish to hurt him. Smith is a fellow nobody would wish to annoy. He could hardly have guessed anything."

"It struck me he kept to the subject rather closely."

"Oh, he wanted to find out. I daresay he had heard we weren't on intimate terms."

"But it was not you, it was Smith he stuck to."

"Do you think it was? If that were the way—I really should not wonder if it were. He thinks it a bad look-out for his friend, and wanted us to put him off. If that was it, Milly was playing into his hands. If that explains it, you must have been sharper than I, for it never once occurred to me."

"It's only a guess; but they had just been there together, and on one side, at least, there is no secret made. Yes, hers of course. She seems rather to enjoy having spectators, and Sir George is by no means asleep, even when he closes his eyes."

"If that is the case," said Sauffrenden, with honest heat, "he may just get some one else to sound his alarm-bell. Asking me to keep watch,

indeed! What business is it of his? The poor girl must marry some one, and I don't think she could do better. As for him, though he is well enough, he's not everybody's bargain, you know. For my part, I don't see anything against the match; and any way I'm not going to be the one to put my foot in it."

"The thing is," said Philip, thoughtfully, "whether he means anything or not?"

"Who? Lorrimer?"

"No, Smith. As yet I cannot see that he has made any great advances, and he was certainly as cool as a cucumber to-day."

"Why, you don't expect a man at his time of life to turn red and white at every word. He may not be exactly ardent, but I think he has made up his mind to it. You said yourself that Lorrimer had fished it out."

"Yes, but——" Philip hesitating. "I was thinking of her purpose, not his."

"Oh, then, you think she proposes to—to make him propose, in short?"

"I think she does. And then whether she accepts him, or not, will be another thing."

"Good gracious! You don't mean to say he is to be thrown overboard? If I thought that——"

"I never said so, Sauffrenden," laughing. "You are in too great a hurry. I think the chances are ten to one that she will accept him."

"Well, that's all I want," replied his friend, pacified. "If she does that, it's all she can do. And I won't have her interfered with. I shall speak seriously to Milly; and as for Lorrimer, he must be prevented putting his oar in. There's Hislop. Don't forget to be at the cottage at half-past five, and we can give you a lift. Ta, ta!"

Lord Sauffrenden was highly delighted with his new toy, and his new toy was the combination of Mr Smith and the Tolletons.

It was necessary, however, to hide his delight, and speak to Milly, as he said, seriously.

He began by telling her that he was very ill-pleased, and that she had been very rude, and pulled such a long face as she drove him home in the pony-carriage, that, weary and unhappy as she had been beforehand, she was soon utterly subdued.

He had met her a mile on the other side of the

cottage for the special purpose of administering this conjugal lecture alone.

Whether anything came of it or not, he would not have Mr Smith annoyed in his house. Mr Smith had just taken Sir George Lorrimer to Freelands, and then she must needs inform them both that the Tolletons were not good enough for her! He really wondered how a woman who prided herself upon her behaviour, could have been so ill bred and disagreeable. Helen Tolleton had never done her any harm, and he would not have it said all over the country that his wife was jealous of her looks.

Of course that was what they all thought. She might have seen Sir George was only amusing himself at her expense.

In all his life Sauffrenden had never said so many cutting things.

Milly could scarcely bear them. She was so unaccustomed to rebuke; so accustomed to love, admiration, and a little subjection. She hardly knew what to make of this. Tears of mortification rose to her eyes as she made her defence.

How could Sir George think so? How could any

of them? Sauffrenden knew it was not true. And it was he who had put it into their heads, saying she and Miss Tolleton hated each other.

Sauffrenden retained the upper hand. He had had to say something. He was so put out he hardly knew what to say. It was the best face he could put on the matter. He had often told her that that little tongue of hers would get her into mischief, and so it had. She must pay for it now.

Milly said petulantly that she had nothing to pay for.

He went on. "You ought to have let the subject drop——"

"So I did. It was he, Sir George, who would go on with it. I let it drop every time. How can you be so unjust, Sauffrenden?"

"I was so vexed about Smith."

"What about Mr Smith? What has he to do with the Tolletons? I don't understand what it is all about. Sir George was only laughing at him."

"Sir George might be laughing, but *he* was not. It is as well you should know that he admires Helen——"

"Oh, indeed he does not, Sauffrenden. He was

only carrying on the joke; and I daresay he likes to be laughed at in that way a little, because he is getting old."

"Nonsense; it was nothing of the kind. If it was, why could you not carry on the joke too?"

"I thought those girls might be making a set at him, and it would be a kindness to warn him."

"I tell you, dear, I will not have you going about warning people in this way. You forget you are only a young pretty woman too, and take to yourself all the scolding airs of an old dowager."

"I am sorry," said she, softened still more by the little compliment than by the rebuke.

"Well, don't do it again, that's all I have to say. And if there ever should be anything between Smith and the Tolletons, don't you take any notice; it's not your place."

She longed to say it was her place—longed to repudiate the idea of there ever being anything between Mr Smith and the Tolletons—but prudence and love prevailed. Sauffrenden had been really vexed; therefore she said nothing.

"Now, mind!"

"Yes, dear."

"Give me a kiss, then, and I'll forgive you. Woa! look out for the powder-flask; you ran it right into me! There's Phil; I told him to be at the cottage. All right Phi—lip! Hey! come to the cor—ner, and we needn't go all the way u—up!"

And so well had he done his work, and so timely had been the chastisement, that he might have conversed on the forbidden subjects for fully a week afterwards, and never once needed to call them *the T's.*

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CHRISTMAS FEAST.

"I AM in a strait, and have come to see who will help me out of it," said Mr Smith, entering the drawing-room at Freelands one afternoon. "I wish to give my work-people a Christmas treat, and have no idea how. Most of them are married men with families; and I mean to have the wives, and children too. We can find room for all, and, I hope, entertainment; if one only knew how to begin. You," turning to Miss Tolleton, "can help me, I am sure."

"If I can, you may be certain I will," replied Helen. "What is the first difficulty—the invitations?"

"No, I think I can manage the invitations. I have a list of names here, and will go round and ask them myself. But the truth is, I am so lamentably

ignorant, I really don't know what to ask them to. Is it dinner, tea, or supper?"

They all laughed.

"They will come to whatever it is, I fancy," said Miss Tolleton, pleasantly. "It is a meal of some sort. In their own minds they will call it dinner, tea, or supper, according to the hour. What o'clock do you think of asking them?"

"That is one of the points I wish to consult upon. The days are closing in so fast now, it would be useless to attempt anything out of doors. Perhaps if we could arrange a magic-lantern, and some fireworks."

"Nothing could be better. Then it will be in the evening; they are sure to like that."

"You think they will? And if the meal—the dinner, tea, or supper—were about six o'clock, would that do?"

"Very well indeed, I should think. They will have got their work over for the day, and have time to get tidy, and give themselves up to enjoyment," said Miss Tolleton, by way of showing her insight into the lives of cottagers.

"Then we must fix on the day. What day are

you disengaged for? I depend upon your all coming to help, remember."

"Yes, of course; we shall be delighted. But any day will suit us. Had you not better refer it to some of your other 'helps'?" adroitly.

"Miss Grey! but she is not likely to do me much good. I hardly could ask Miss Fulton to come so far. Mr and Mrs Hardwicke will, however, I think."

Helen turned up her nose at Mr and Mrs Hardwicke. Village people! She had hoped for the Sauffrendens.

"And let me see," pursued he, "there are the two Miss Bains. Mrs Rodney would have given us great assistance; but I fear she will hardly be well enough. We must have Mr Rodney, however."

Mr Rodney, the curate, has been once or twice named in these pages. He was a smooth-faced, long-necked young man, with a bubble in his throat. Worse than that could not be said against him. He was much beloved in the parish, on account of his tender-heartedness. More than once in his bachelor days he had been known to carry his own dinner to some poor house, where it is certain he never ate it; and he

was constantly seen in new clothes, for the simple reason that he had given away his old ones.

When he married, this state of things could not, of course, go on. His own dinner he must eat, and his old clothes were well mended ; but the joy of giving was not debarred him. He was still to be seen carrying the well-known tin pot, and his hand went to his pocket as readily as before.

Mrs Rodney was all that was good, kind, and worthy of her husband. The only thing against her was that she was always having babies. At present she was recovering from her fourth confinement, having been married just four years and three months.

Her sister, Miss Clay, was staying with her.

Helen reminded Mr Smith of Miss Clay. She had seen her in church, and thought her privately a dull-looking girl—a poor edition of her sister. She would do for this occasion admirably.

Mr Smith was glad to hear of the addition, and promised to call on Mr Rodney, and engage his and Miss Clay's attendance without delay.

"Then there are the Miss Hunts," said he ; "perhaps Mrs Hunt? Do you think——"

"Oh yes, with the greatest pleasure; she would

be quite hurt if you left her out. Dr Hunt, too, would come, if you asked him, I daresay. Why, Mr Smith, you don't know how much we shall all enjoy it. And now, is there anything we can do? Are there any preparations to be made?"

No, it appeared the preparations could be made by others. The fireworks could be ordered by one friend, and the magic-lantern given in charge to another. His old housekeeper was equal to undertaking the provision department. The help he really wanted was on the day. He wished to be certain of their presence.

This was assured him. They were as anxious to come as he could be to have them. As to fixing the day, they would not hear of it; they might be depended on for any day. Some one else must do that—Mr Rodney, for instance. He had engagements; they had none.

Helen was inflexible on this point. She felt that the presence of the mild curate would impart a dignity to the scene which it might otherwise lack. It would be right and proper, and well for all parties, that he should be there.

In this way they could also become acquainted

with Miss Clay. Since Mrs Rodney had had her sister with her, the Miss Tolletons had called more than once, but Miss Clay had not chosen to take their cards as left on her. She had never come to Freelands, and had once or twice turned into a shop if she saw any of the party coming. It did not look as if she wished for their acquaintance.

The curate and his wife were themselves politely civil to the Tolletons. It is true they managed with wonderful dexterity to evade their numerous invitations, and that Mrs Rodney blushed uncomfortably if accosted by them in public. But neither she nor her husband failed in maintaining relations of quiet distant courtesy; and they walked steadily into the Freelands avenue, even if they did glance down the road before doing so.

"They cannot harm us," Mrs Rodney said, "but Sarah had better not go."

And so the Miss Tolletons had not been introduced to Miss Clay. This was the reason why Helen was anxious she should be asked to the Hill. To such a gathering they could hardly help taking her. If Mr Smith would allow them to fix the day, they were secured.

Mr Smith being equally desirous of their company, this was soon arranged, and he promised as soon as possible to let the ladies know the result of his application.

Would Mr Tolleton come? was the next suggestion. He had not liked to make it before—had not felt sure that he would care to leave his comfortable fireside; but if he would——. They were sure he would—he would be quite melancholy if left behind. He might be depended on.

"I hope the Miss Hunts will be able to come too," Mr Smith reverted to them, good-naturedly. He hoped every one would be able to come. He felt a glow of spirits and happy anticipations that must have vent. He was ready for anything.

"They are at home to-day, I know; at least Mrs Hunt is," said Helen, softly.

"Perhaps I might look in on them after calling on the Rodneys," replied he, quick to catch the hint. "That is, if I may depend on its being all one to you?"

"Don't think of us at all; count upon us. We are not going out at all, you know, and are perfectly free. We would not miss this for the world.

When you have arranged it with the others, you will come and let us know, will you not?"

But why had he not asked the Sauffrendens? It would have been such a chance, such an opportunity. Even if *she* could not have been compassed, Lord Sauffrenden must have fallen a prey. Helen would have been so quiet, so demure, so sweetly, gravely beautiful, that she would have taken them by storm. For the first time she felt a little cross with Mr Smith.

Mr Rodney fixed the following Thursday. There was service on Wednesday evenings, and he had a meeting on Friday; but his own little reading on Thursday he could easily put off. He would be glad, really glad to do it. It was so seldom that husbands and wives were permitted to share in the same treat, that he was doubly pleased that it was to be so in the present instance.

He always felt a man wasn't half a man without his wife; and here he coloured, and looked as if it had suddenly dawned upon him, that this was not exactly the remark he ought to have made, to one who could not be expected to sympathise in the sentiment.

Mr Smith, however, with the most happy unconsciousness, concurred heartily, and all was right.

Mr Rodney being thus secured, and Miss Clay likewise, he bent his steps to the doctor's house.

It was the same story here. Of course they would come. Mrs Hunt would quite have scolded him if they had not been asked; she really thought she should have invited herself. For the doctor she could not so readily promise, but she thought he might be looked for at any rate some time in the course of the evening. The dear girls would be only too happy to assist. Maria was the very person for anything of this kind. So fond of the poor, and always fussing about them. How delighted she would be, to be sure!

Was there anything special required of her? She could answer for its being done, and well done; although perhaps, as her mother, she had no business to say so.

Mr Smith confessed that there was nothing in particular required at Miss Hunt's hands. He would count, however, on her kindness when the day came. The young ladies would all be needed to take charge of the tea department, and perhaps Miss Hunt would

kindly preside at one of the tables. He proposed to place a lady at the head of each tea-table, Miss Clay taking Mrs Rodney's place at the principal one.

Miss Clay? That was all very well; very proper and suitable. A silent girl with a mole on her left cheek. She would make tea admirably, and never speak to Mr Smith.

Had he engaged any other assistants? He had not fixed the day before speaking to Mr Rodney. This evasion he allowed himself. It was not her business what assistants he had engaged.

She, however, saw not the evasion. She was all triumph.

"Girls, girls, who do you think has been here? Mr Smith. What a pity you were out! But what do you think he came for? You'll never guess, I can tell you. A grand ploy up at the Hill, and we are all to go and help. What do you think of that? Ah! the Tolletons thought they would get him to give a ball, did they? I should like to see them do it. They will be glad enough to get their noses in along with other people now. Maria is to make tea at one of the tables, and Miss Clay at the other. Very nice and right to ask Miss Clay. She goes instead of Mrs

Rodney, you know. Poor Mrs Rodney never comes in for anything nice. Now I suppose you'll want something new to wear. We must do what we can with papa."

There was no repressing her elation. She would not even animadvert on the dirty marks left by their boots on the carpet.

"Will *he* be there, do you think?" said Maria to her sister, as soon as they were up-stairs.

"I daresay."

"I almost wish he were not."

"Why?"

"Because mamma will make me stick to Mr Smith all evening."

Captain Wellwood, however, was not there, it never having entered Mr Smith's head to ask him.

Every one who had been invited came. The evening was all that could be desired, even for fireworks. Miss Clay was installed at the head of one table, and Miss Hunt led to another. Would Miss Tolleton take the third? Miss Carry Tolleton did. Helen had waived the position to her sister when Mr Smith came to make the final arrangements. She now took a seat quite in the background, busy-

ing herself among empty cups and saucers, and apparently desirous of nothing but being useful.

"Do you see how quiet Helen is?" whispered Mrs Hunt to Clare. "She is quite neglected, poor thing. Now Mr Smith, do sit down here, and rest yourself for a minute. You have been on your feet all evening. Let Maria give you a good cup of tea to refresh you."

Mr Smith, with a vivid recollection of Maria's tea, hastily declined the second proposal, though he so far acceded to the first as to occupy the vacant seat beside her for a few minutes. Mrs Hunt's indicating finger came back to her bread-and-butter, and she looked serenely satisfied.

Not so her victim. He was restless. He did not wish to get stuck there. He ought to look after his other guests. He wondered what Miss Tolleton was doing behind the door.

Why was she, so eminently fitted to grace the front, hid in the background? He longed to go and see, but it was some time before he could. He was wanted here, he was wanted there. Was there to be more ale drawn? Was the great set piece to be in front of the drawing-room or the dining-room

window? Mr Bowling had not left out a certain key. Mr Smith had to see to many things in Bowling's department. His old butler had been ill, and was getting a holiday.

When at length he did find himself behind the pantry door, a passing word was all that he could obtain.

"I am quite happy here, thank you. There is so much to be done, and it is delightful to be really of use. You have plenty of assistants in the room, and some one is needed here."

"But why should it be you?" There was a flattering emphasis on the words.

"Because I like it," with cheerful decision. "How well everything is going off! So many happy faces! Oh do go away now, you are so dreadfully in the way here!"

So laughing, she drove him off; but it was enough, his reluctance was evident.

Lily, however, was still less pleased with her sister's obscurity. "You have hardly even shown yourself in the room, and Mrs Hunt thinks she is carrying all before her."

"That is just what she ought to think, my dear."

"But you have never had a word from Mr Smith."

"Indeed I have; he has just been here, and I sent him away."

"What did you do that for?"

"Because I didn't want him—just now."

"And how does he like your shutting yourself up here?"

"Not at all. I never supposed he would. I rather intended him not to like it. You have no idea how much good this will do him."

"Well, but do you mean it to go on all evening?"

"That depends. All tea-time certainly. By-and-by, perhaps, I may better myself, as the servants say. Do you know who is going to show off the magic-lantern?"

"Yes; a Mr Bohns, a German. He has come down on purpose. I have just been talking to him, —that man with the beard. Why do you want to know?"

"I did not wish it to be Mr Smith, that was all."

Lily was swept away. More empty cups and saucers had to be deposited, and she could no longe fill up the narrow doorway.

When the time for exhibiting the magic-lantern arrived, however, she remembered what Helen had said, and looked round for her. Some project she had in her mind certainly.

But Helen was nowhere to be seen. Was it possible that she had stayed behind with those stupid cups and saucers, and never even come into the room where the show was? So it appeared. But the room was nearly dark, and she could not be certain. Her height alone must mark her coming in with the others, and there was a good deal of confusion ere all were seated.

Suddenly the light was altogether obscured, and she heard a low voice close behind her say,—"No, thank you; this will do perfectly." How in the world had she got there? She must have been one of the first to enter. But, then, how had she been unobserved? And where was the end of this retirement any more than the other? It was carrying it too far—unless, indeed——in the first flash of light which followed, she, looking round, dimly discerned her sister, and, beside her, Mr Smith.

The light was so confined to the further end of the room, that only to one already half prepared, could

they have been distinguishable. Helen had shown herself all Helen again.

Great and enduring was her sister's satisfaction. There they were—the embryo lovers—safely ensconced behind all the faces, half concealed by the heavy curtain—she, barely visible, he, still deeper in the shade. When there was light in the room, every eye was on the white sheet, with its startling, curious, and comic apparitions. In the dark intervals, all was buzz and bustle; every tongue wagging, and no ear intent on what might be going on so close at hand, that it must be innocent.

That the rest of the company believed their host to be engaged among the exhibitors, was evident.

Mrs Hunt still retained her illuminated face; and Mr Rodney made complimentary remarks, loud enough for those on the other side of the screen to hear.

Long and loud was the applause which greeted each succeeding scene. The rustics, well plied with good cheer—ale and porter—(tea had been only for their wives) elbowed each other for the front. Joan forgot her awe of Madam, and laid a hand upon her knee. Miss Clay allowed herself to be leant upon,

knelt upon, kneaded into shape, pressed and dirtied by a crew of confiding little ones. Dr Hunt, attempting to make his way through the throng at the door, was fairly told he must remain where he was.

He had the sense to take the prohibition in good part. The men knew him, and he them. To-morrow they would recognise all his title to observance; but this was their night—this was their entertainment—they were equal to anything and anybody. He understood the case, and gave in with good-humour. A sight of his wife's face, and a reassuring nod from her, further helped his patience.

She was seated in the front row, Maria by her side; and the nod was intended to let him know that all was right in that quarter. It was not till afterwards, however, that she could whisper,—

"Oh, my dear, I wish you had been here! The tea was really magnificent, and Maria quite—Mr Smith was at her table constantly. I don't think he sat down by Miss Clay once."

Meantime, Helen had not forgotten her intention of making Miss Clay's acquaintance. When the magic-lantern display was over, the first thing Lily

saw was her sister—emerged from her corner, no one could tell how—in the act of bowing to Miss Clay—Mr Smith having just introduced them.

Miss Clay was looking a little uncomfortable, and assenting shyly to Miss Tolleton's graceful nothings. Immediately after, Mr Smith was seized on by the German, desirous of explaining some mistake in the programme, and no one ever discovered that they had not been together during the whole exhibition.

Everybody was now eager to get out of doors.

"Such a night for fireworks," Mr Tolleton observed repeatedly, he did not remember to have seen since the last night he had had the good fortune to see fireworks. To this he received different replies. Some had never seen really good fireworks in their lives. Some had had fireworks themselves, now and then, in a small way. Some had never seen fireworks without rain; and some never but in favourable weather. Each had his own experience to give, and no one listened to that of his neighbour.

Mrs Hunt hoped that Mr Smith was not thinking of letting off any of the fireworks himself. She was sure it was too cold a night for him to be walking

about on the wet grass. There were plenty of others whom it would do no harm to. He had much better stay quietly with the ladies in the drawing-room. For her part, she meant to get into the bow-window, where she was sure she should see everything that there was to be seen. She then summoned Maria; but to her amazement, to her almost unbelieving satisfaction, Maria declined to come. She was going out with Mr Smith to inspect some of the pieces. Mr Smith had asked her; the others were going, too, and they had all got galoshes.

Mrs Hunt said not another word about the wet grass.

The party set out. Helen and Miss Clay first; the younger Miss Tolletons, one on each side of the resigned curate; Clare Hunt, her father, and several waifs and strays of young men, all in a bunch; and Mr Smith—oh happy moment!—Mr Smith and Maria last of all.

Mrs Hunt saw them file past—saw Helen leading the way with the shy stranger girl, and her sisters hemming in the curate, and felt a contemptuous pity for their fate.

"They were obliged to take up with the Rodney set, you know," said she, afterwards.

Her present observations, however, had to be for Miss Bain—that Miss Bain whom Helen Tolleton had selected as a suitable wife for Mr Smith, when he first came amongst them.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MISS BAINS.

THE Miss Bains, for there were two of them, were spinsters of a certain age, who, to use the hackneyed phrase, had seen better days.

This, at least, they constantly affirmed themselves. They lived in a small hothouse in Eastworld, whose dingy rooms, with their low ceilings and unopened windows, had a faint pervading smell as of gas escaping.

They kept a large, lean dog, without whose attendance they seldom walked out, and who was supposed to find his meals in this way. No one, at least, had ever seen him fed otherwise. Their tables, chairs, and mantelpieces were encumbered with relics; and heirlooms of strangely little value were to be found in plenty. Their money appeared to be scarce; but they had all the remembrance of it.

In their appearance the sisters harmonised equally little with the usual ideas of clean, tidy, trim, old-maidenhood. When caught in their morning attire, they were slovens, whom one felt ought hardly to be looked at. When dressed for company, they presented a fantastic mixture of grandeur and disease. Everything they wore was magnificent, but smitten. Their gowns were grease-stained and frayed; their silk stockings had holes; their laces were crumpled; and their jewels chiefly consisted of settings without stones.

They had come to the feast in all these decayed splendours, and were now sitting in the bow-window, listening while Mrs Hunt descanted on Mr Smith.

"Such a host as he makes, does he not, Miss Lydia? So thoughtful for everybody! Such preparations! Fires in all the rooms, and no stint of anything! Do you know, I really believe there is a cold supper laid out in the library! The man went in with a trayful of glasses as we came past the door; and I just caught sight of it through the opening—jellies, turkey, and all!"

"You don't say so, Mrs Hunt? Well, that really is too much. Dear me! I thought we had done very

well, as it was. Maria gave me two cups of excellent tea, and Mr Smith himself made me taste the pudding. I can't say but what I was glad to get a bittie, for you know we dine early. And then, as we didn't know exactly what to expect, we just took a snatch, instead of our regular meal, meaning to wait and see. If there hadn't been anything else, you know, we could have done uncommonly well; but if there had, it would have been a pity to spoil it. And really when I got the pudding I needed nothing extra. Dear me, a supper! This is really treating us like princes!"

"Bachelors are always the best of entertainers," rejoined the doctor's wife. "If he goes on like this, we shall all get so selfish we shan't want him ever to change his state, I'm afraid."

"No, that we shan't!" cried the other little old lady, with some eagerness. (People should have no handle for suspecting her and Lyddy of opposite desires.) "We shall not indeed. He is a deal better as he is. Dear me! We shouldn't have been half as comfortable here to-night if there had been a lady presiding."

"That depends, of course, on who the lady was,"

rejoined Mrs Hunt, a little shortly. "To be sure, if Mr Smith ever does take it into his head to marry, and he's just at the age when many a man does, he would have every right to be particular."

"Oh, but I should say he was far too comfortable," put in Miss Lyddy. "Not but what I have heard a lady spoken of." (Mrs Hunt's heart gave a great throb.) "And one who would well become the position too. A grand lady of the Hill she would make. But dear! I say, if there had been anything in it, for certain she would have been here to-night. Is it likely she would not have come, or that he would have neglected to ask her? No, no; there's no truth in that tale, we may depend upon it."

"You're mysterious, Miss Lydia," said the doctor's wife, with a little quivering laugh. "Pray let us first hear what the tale is. It has never reached my ears, I can tell you. I thought we had ladies enough here to-night. There is hardly one left in Eastworld, with the exception of poor Mrs Rodney, who is always out of luck when there's anything going on."

"Very true. Poor thing, so she is! But as for the other, she's not an Eastworld lady yet, Mrs Hunt, though maybe we shall see her one some of

these days. It's best not to name names. Who's in that window?" in a loud voice. "Anybody there?"

No voice responding, she resumed her confidential whisper.

"It's best to be cautious when one can't see round the room. I got into such a pucker once through neglecting that, it has been a lesson to me ever since. 'Melia and I were staying with Jane Bond. Jane is our father's cousin, you know, on the English side, so of course we keep up the connection. Well, you know Jane's house. It's all queer twists and corners and holes in the wall. One never feels safe in it, at least I'm sure I never do, now. This was the story. One day when we had been there about a week, I went into the parlour, and seeing, as I thought, only 'Melia sitting by the table; ''Melia,' says I, 'I do think that beard of Jane's is growing. It's as big as many a lad's that calls for shaving-water.' And 'Melia she gave such a cough, and look at me, and there was Jane in the window! Well, you know, I might have said worse. And very thankful I felt I hadn't gone on longer. But, for all that, I've never been asked there since, although Jane made believe she didn't mind, and we got over it as well as we

could at the time. But it has just made me careful ever since, how I name names in a room one can't see all round at once. Who's there?" diving her head forward beyond the curtain, and listening.

As the silence was unbroken, the other sister took up the narrative.

"Jane has never been quite the same to us since. She thinks we don't observe, but for all she sends us bits of letters, and a goose at Christmas, there's a difference. It might have been fancy, but we thought we had never eaten a goose as hard as we got last year. Perhaps there won't be one at all this. That would be a fine story. We have had our regular goose every Christmas these ten years. But no doubt it was a foolish thing of Lyddy to do, and she's sensible of it. The last time we asked Jane here, she took the invitation very high, and showed she had no will to come."

"People often pay dear for mistakes, especially from imprudence," said Mrs Hunt, sententiously. "One can't be careful enough. But there's nobody here for certain to-night, Miss Lydia, and I think you might just——"

"Oh dear—dear—dear me! That is magnificent!

Where is it? Where is it gone?" cried Miss Lyddy, straining her neck after the first rocket. "How it made me jump! So that was the beginning, I suppose. But they'll surely not be all like that. No, no; the rest are further off, that's right. Well, I—that was perfectly—oh, Mrs Hunt, don't lose the sight! There they are! There they go! See, see! One after another! 'Melia, look! My certy! I'm thankful I'm safe indoors! What if any one should be killed! But the doctor's here, that's a comfort. There he is, too! There they all are, as plain as a pikestaff! Maria's white frock as blue as blue can be in that queer light. Oh, Mrs Hunt, do you think it's safe? Do you not think the girls would be better in the house, now that it's all begun? We can call to them, you know. I declare I think we ought."

Mrs Hunt, however, arrested her hand.

"There's no fear, Miss Lydia; their father is with them. Make your mind easy, Mr Smith will take good care that nothing happens. Now you must really tell me what it was about Mr Smith and——"

"Whew! That was a dandy! That was a—how it made me jump! Good gracious, 'Melia, I'm all in a tremble! What do they have them so near the

house for?" cried the excitable creature, as a Roman candle shot off within, as she averred, a yard of her elbow. "If I had only brought my smelling-bottle; but the last time it was used we couldn't get the cork out. What a pity it should be left behind! If any one did, you know—— This really is—— Whew! There's another! I'm sure I don't know whether—— Bless me!"

"Don't be alarmed, Lyddy," said the calmer 'Melia, whose voice was only a little tremulous; "it's startling, but not dangerous, I'm told. Look at those faces under the tree. There's old Butts and his Jemima, as pleased as possible. Poor Jemima was sadly afraid she would have to give it up to-night, her cough has been so troublesome. Such nights as she has, poor soul! But there she stands, and seems to have forgotten all about it. I shall shake my finger at her, though. She ought to come in."

No notice was taken of the finger, which was, in fact, quite invisible to the threatened Jemima.

"Ah! she'll pay for it by-and-by," said 'Melia, with a sense of justice. "Foolish thing! she's coughing at this moment. Well, I've done all I could; she must stand on her own feet; the

blame's not mine. Bless me! who is that wild-looking—why, it's our Harry! I do declare I might have guessed till midsummer! Who would have thought of Harry?"

"And there's Bullett, like a great cannibal king!" cried Lyddy, with rather a happy hit. "One would hardly know Bullett without his blue apron, if it weren't for—— Oh, look, he's holding up little Tommy, poor little soul! I didn't know Tommy was here to-night. I must really find them out afterwards. I suppose Bullett supplied the meat, 'Melia?"

"And there's Mr Smith and Maria—and the rest," added Mrs Hunt, whose eyes had all this time been wandering among the different groups in search of them. What was Jemima, or Bullett, or any one else to her, compared with these two great orbs in her heavens? She had not listened to a word of the old ladies' exclamations. "There they all are! Close at hand, now, Miss Lydia, under the great oak. There now, at your left—don't you see them, the whole party?"

"I see them; I see them now, Mrs Hunt. Dear me! how strange they do look! Maria quite pic-

turesque. Which are the rest? Ah! there's Helen Tolleton, graceful creature! She's holding the stick. What for, I wonder? Did you ever——she was as close to it as I am to you!"

Helen had held the rocket for Mr Smith to fire; and when the display was over, she walked with him through the shrubbery back to the house. Thus much she permitted him. By her contrivance Maria had by far the greater share of his attentions. He himself did not discover this. Lily did, and it amused her. Of the others, those most interested noted it with inward rapture, the rest were otherwise engrossed.

Maria Hunt was not supposed to be a captivating girl.

All suspicion, however, was diverted from the Tolletons. Mrs Hunt took Helen under her wing, and hoped she had not got her pretty dress spoilt; while the doctor said it was more important that she had not got her pretty throat sore.

For his part he expected to call at every house next day, after such a mad escapade. He was in such good humour, that he absolutely talked "shop."

Mr Smith had been easily managed. He was thinking chiefly of his guests and their enjoyment; a little of Miss Tolleton, and not at all of Miss Hunt. How she was so often by his side, it had not occurred to him to wonder. She was too insignificant.

But he had wondered a little—he had felt a little hurt with Helen. She appeared to be keeping out of his way. Could he have offended her? She had never been more gracious, more winning, than when they sat together in the dark corner, while the magic-lantern was going on. He had reckoned on her walking with him, and she had sped off with Miss Clay.

He had asked her to come and inspect some arrangement, and she had come, but Miss Clay was with her. Then, when he wanted some one to hold his rocket, she had stepped forward, as the rest hung back. He had thanked her gravely, and she had walked home by his side. She kept him in a perpetual ferment.

The entertainment, however, was drawing to a close. He must clear his mind from all personal thoughts. None must feel neglected or overlooked.

They were summoned to collect around the front door. The ladies assembled inside the hall, and Mr Rodney stepped forward to deliver the short address which he had prepared. It was not much of an address, but it did what was wanted. It sobered, softened the exhilarated party; and even those in whose hearts it found no ready echo, listened with respectful toleration. "Rodney, he's a good chap, and a pity he warn't rector." And then they cheered loudly, and began to move slowly off in groups, towards the village.

Little Tommy had fallen asleep, and Jemima's cough made itself heard as they went by. The whole air was impregnated with tobacco. The sides of the walks were sadly injured.

Mr Smith, however, stood with uncovered head, and serene brow, happy in the happiness he had given; nor would he allow the hall-door to be closed until the last step retreated down the avenue.

The supper which Mrs Hunt had so cleverly discovered was then announced; and the party, disencumbered of their wraps, and with smoothed hair and glowing cheeks, adjourned to the other room.

One other discovery Mrs Hunt had made. She could not have slept in her bed that night otherwise. She had forced from Miss Lyddy's lips the name of the Lady who was spoken of as the possible mistress of the Hill.

CHAPTER XV.

THE END OF THE FEAST.

"May I sit by you?" said Helen to Miss Clay, as the party arranged themselves round the supper-table.

There had been no formal going in—every one went as they chose. Miss Clay had taken a seat about the middle of the table, exactly underneath the chandelier. A more brilliant-looking creature than Helen Tolleton, as she emerged from the doorway, and took the chair beside her in this centre of light and radiance, could hardly have been imagined. Her pale face was lit up by the excitement and the evening air. She had come forth from her chrysalis state of obscurity and retirement, and spread her wings—the gay, triumphant butterfly.

Who but she could have taken the scarlet bouquet from her place, and inserted it so suddenly, so

coquettishly, among her dark coils? Who but she kept up that fire of fun and repartee with old Bartlett the banker; turned the wretched head of the red-haired clerk; and made even the gentle curate confide afterwards in the safe, true, loving, wifely ear, which received all his secrets, that he had *admired*, though he could not *approve*?

Mr Smith was even startled.

He broke off twice in the middle of his conversation with the banker's wife, and let a whole sentence of Mrs Hunt's fall unheeded to the ground, while he stared at Helen.

What was she doing down there? How had she the power, go as low as she would, to make that place a centre? Here again she had slid beyond his reach; and though no longer hid in a corner, though rather the cynosure of all eyes, yet not shining for him.

It made him discontented. He could see the eyes bent upon her, the listening heads, the stolen glances, returning more and more frequently. He could hear the loud applause of the older men, and note the more meaning silence of the younger. He even fancied, but this might have been merely a fancy, that a cloud, a depression, a change of some sort, had come

over the faces of those who were not bowing to the goddess.

Some of his lady guests looked grave.

Mrs Hunt too had lost her animation. Although Lyddy Bain, who was a stupid creature, and one that never could see half a yard in front of her, might put no faith in the story she was herself promulgating, Mrs Hunt, who piqued herself on the accuracy of her perceptions, and more especially on the length of her vision, could not feel so easy on the subject.

She had been all her life gifted with powers of discernment. She could always tell events that were likely to take place long before any one else had dreamt of them. She knew things before people knew them themselves. In short, to listen to her, she was a prophet arisen in the later days.

The name Lyddy had whispered was that of Miss Fulton; and so much had Lyddy heard of Mr Smith's being at the Hall, and of the Admiral's attentions, and Miss Fulton's suitability, that it was poor consolation to Mrs Hunt to find that her only grounds for disbelief consisted in the lady's absence from the feast.

"If she had been here, you know, it would have been as clear as day," said she.

Now there were twenty reasons why Miss Fulton should not be there. For one thing, the Fultons gave themselves airs. For the sake of ten thousand a-year, and a husband of her own age, Miss Fulton might consent to be Mr Smith's wife, but she had never yet mixed with the Eastworld people. The Tolletons alone, of all present, had her acquaintance. Mrs Hunt did not know how fast that acquaintance was being withered up, under the blight of Lady Sauffrenden's frown. It was possible—more than possible—that if Miss Fulton had been invited, she had excused herself.

She was not a rival to be despised. She was only too formidable. As she looked at Maria, Maria now faded into insignificance, dull and overlooked by every one, the old feeling of dissatisfaction arose within her.

It was this, and not Helen Tolleton's shining sunlight, which caused her to look thoughtful.

Still she made a good supper. She was determined to have nothing to regret, in looking back upon that well-filled board.

She took lobster, knowing that the doctor would have frowned upon her; and turned her head the other way while her second glass of champagne was being poured out.

She would just get one word with Lyddy before they went away.

Lyddy, however, had more important things on her mind.

"Just see, Mrs Hunt, was there ever anything more tiresome? I had pinned the napkin all round, and thought it was as safe as could be. My best dress! The Macbain tartan! It's always the way whenever we put them on. If there's a spot of oil, or wine, or tea, or anything that won't come out, it always happens that it's on the Macbain tartans. I declare, I think we must just lock them by, or they'll be spoilt altogether. Eh? What did you say?" For Mrs Hunt had at length contrived to edge in her remark about Miss Fulton.

"Miss Fulton? Oh, Mrs Bartlett tells me I'm quite mistaken, and, to her certain knowledge, Miss Fulton would never look at him. There's somebody else—— Yes, indeed, Miss Clay. I do think everybody has. It would be a shame, I'm sure, if they

hadn't. It's many a day since I have been at anything so grand, at any rate. 'Melia, do look here. Shall I put on cold water at once? I dabbed my handkerchief in at table, but I have not put it on yet. What do you think?"

"You had better leave it till you get home, and try benzine," recommended Mrs Hunt. "Who was the somebody else, Miss Lydia?"

"Benzine?" said Lyddy, looking round as if expecting to see it. "But I doubt that we haven't any. Besides, do you think it would be safe?"

"Perfectly safe on a good silk like that." Mrs Hunt was bent on propitiating. "But I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll bring in my bottle to-morrow morning early, and rub it in myself. If benzine won't take it out, nothing will."

It was no use trying to get anything further out of Lyddy that night; she must take her quietly next day.

By twelve o'clock supper was over, and the great business of cloaking, bonneting, hatting, going on.

Helen, the vivid rose-colour still in her cheek, came up with her sisters to make their adieux. They were the first to depart. Their host was surrounded

on every side. The few frank words of thanks for their pleasant evening, were spoken in the hearing of all who chose to listen.

Miss Bain's gratitude was much more humble, Mrs Hunt's infinitely more complimentary.

Mr Rodney spoke warmly on behalf of the parish; and Mr Bartlett, who had been listening to him, did his best to continue in the same strain.

All agreed that the evening had passed off to admiration. Even Bullett, the grumbling butcher, as he made out his bill for the rounds and sirloins, was won over so far as to modify his complaint into the generous desire that so deserving a gentleman should have been blest with a family.

After the feast there was a period of stagnation in the neighbourhood.

Christmas was coming, and every one was saving up for Christmas. The Sauffrendens, it is true, dined once at Fulton Hall,—Mr Smith having been asked to meet them. But Mr Smith was not there; and the Admiral, with his usual adjuration, declared he was the slipperiest eel to basket he had ever met with. Cornelia had no notion of landing him herself, and he couldn't work with another person's tackle.

The plague of it was, that all the time, he had to be so mincingly particular in what he said; for if Corny once took it into that fly-away head of hers that there was anything in the wind, she would be off like a shot.

No glimmer of his common-sense was therefore to reach her foolish mind. He must keep it close, close.

To the Sauffrendens he merely observed that their new neighbour appeared to shut himself up pretty tight; they never met him anywhere.

"That was a grand affair at his house the other day," said Lord Sauffrenden.

The Admiral pricked up his ears.

"Ah? eh? I didn't hear of it. Was it——"

"A tenant's or workman's dinner, or something of that sort. We saw the fireworks from our windows."

"Indeed! ah! very nice; ve—ry nice," condescendingly. "These kind of things, now, are just what we want. Very nice—delightful. Cornelia there, is up to her eyes in them. We must have one at the Hall—eh, Corny? Ask the Reverend about it" (by this name he was accustomed to designate his brother), "and we'll have Smith over to give us the cue."

Mr Smith, however, was again unable to swallow the tempting bait, and no more was heard of the treat at the Hall.

Mr Smith was suffering, as Mrs Hunt had said he would, from the effects of walking about on the wet grass among the fireworks.

The warmth of the rooms, with the draughts of cold air inseparable from such an occasion, had perhaps as much to do with it as the wet grass.

So, at least, the doctor said. He, like the butcher, having prognosticated no good accruing to himself from the new-comer, was, like him, agreeably surprised.

It was true that he had long since ceased to mourn over Mr Smith's bachelorhood. If Maria could only be installed mistress of the Hill, he thought he should never regret anything again. Never regret in the dark, that is to say.

He had begun to hope that this almost too fair vision might really come to pass. With his own eyes he had seen the host escorting his daughter about at the feast; and his wife had, almost with tears of joy, assured him of his attentions to her during the earlier portion of the evening. "Miss

Fulton! Pah!" said she; "I don't care that for Miss Fulton! I believe it was all a cock-and-bull story of that creature, Lyddy Bain's."

"Their man rode in at the gate, as I left this morning, however," said her husband, uneasily.

"Brown horse?"

"Yes, yes; I know the fellow. James Galt. I had to attend him when he broke his collar-bone. I spoke to him to-day."

"Then I tell you what, Robert; just speak a little about Maria now and then, and see how he takes it. It will be easy enough when you are up there so often."

The doctor took her advice. The result was satisfactory. The horizon again cleared.

Mr Smith showed no reluctance to enter on the subject. He even politely continued it. He admired the doctor's woollen comforter, Maria's work. One was eagerly offered him, and only declined because he had never worn one in his life. On this occasion it was earnestly recommended. After such a chill and sore throat, Dr Hunt considered that he must be wrapped up. He could not answer for the consequences if he would not wear a comforter, and in-

deed (laughing) he should set his daughter to work that very day. Thus beset, of course Mr Smith had yielded. The comforter was to be worn; and Mrs Hunt hurried out directly she heard of it, to buy the best double Berlin the village could supply.

"Ah, I wish she could have made a waistcoat like that Helen Tolleton sent to some one of her gentlemen," said she, regretfully. "I don't know how it is, my girls' fingers are all thumbs. It is a perfect miracle Maria's knowing how to do this, even."

Maria made no difficulty about the undertaking. She had become much more reconciled to her cruel situation than she had ever thought possible. By her father's account, Mr Smith was so much in love.

Clare, indeed, was a little sceptical. "Papa meets things half-way, you know," said she. "He hears bits, and then he puts in the rest."

To her surprise, however, Maria demurred to this.

She still declared, indeed, that it was dreadful to have it so, but it became apparent that she did not quite desire to have the dread removed. Having tasted the sweets of consequence, she could not all at once resign them. She began to think that Clare, with all her wisdom, might be mistaken sometimes.

Mamma, who could always find out if there were anything to complain of, was satisfied; and Clare knew as well as she did, that if there really were nothing in it, mamma would go on dreadfully.

As for herself she hated the idea, but (sagaciously) she could not shut her eyes to facts. Mr Smith had hung about her all that night; and had certainly never spoken one half as much to any of the other girls—not even to the Tolletons, not even to Helen.

"Helen kept out of his way," said Clare, bluntly.

"So did I, I'm sure; as much as ever I could. I only walked with him because I couldn't help it. Helen always shoved me back, and then got away herself. How could mamma fancy Helen would ever look at him? All evening she was running away from him."

"How could he speak to her, then?"

"I never said he did, Clare; I know he didn't. But then I tried to get away from him too, and he followed me. I did not wish to speak to him any more than she, but I couldn't help it."

Maria, being thus convinced, set to work at her comforter, and all went smoothly in the doctor's

house, with only a dim shadow in the distance looming in the shape of Miss Fulton.

At the end of a fortnight Mr Smith came downstairs.

He had had another hurried visit from Sir George Lorrimer, with whom at this time he had business transactions. Sir George had summoned him to town, but hearing he was unwell, got his papers together, and ran down to the Hill instead.

He stayed a day or two, and when he was gone, the stagnation in the neighbourhood began to communicate itself in an alarming manner to the lonely man.

Only a fortnight before, and all had been so gay, so lively; now the life and the spirit of it was gone. A common experience in country life. Everything at a standstill. People you have been meeting three or four times a-week, suddenly fall out of your path. An enchanted sleep steals over the place.

Into this sleep the neighbourhood of Eastworld fell.

Mr Smith thought often and wearily of Freelands. Why did he hear nothing of his friends there? Was he forgotten? He thought so.

But he was not. It was they who thought him remiss.

Had it only been known that Sir George Lorrimer had left, all would have been right. But they thought Sir George was there. If so, it was impossible to carry on matters. Lily indeed suggested an invitation to dinner to both gentlemen; but Helen, more wise, shook her head.

Sir George was all very well for once. The luncheon had been a success, but it would be foolish to risk more. Besides, they had no right to ask him. He might think it officious, and it would never do if he were to express this opinion to Mr Smith.

"When he brought him here!" said Lily.

"Yes, I know it could be done. And if we had the chance of meeting him, and asking him ourselves, it might be different; but to send a note up! I don't know quite how Mr Smith would take it."

"He should not have asked to bring him here, then."

"You know, Lily, he never asked. It was we ourselves insisted on his bringing the old friend."

"Ay, the old friend," said Lily, laughing, "but not the young man. Not that sort of friend at all.

You know best, Nelly. But I should be afraid if we take no notice of him for so long; he will think we are drawing back."

"Nonsense! If he does, I can soon make up for it. How stupid of papa not to find out when Sir George is going!"

"Going, my dear!" exclaimed her father, awoke from a gentle doze by the sound of "papa." "I forgot to tell you, Sir George is gone."

"Gone? When? To-day?"

"Oh dear no, some days ago. It was that stupid Jessamy's mistake. I went in on Monday to get some—stuff, and he had a long story about a gentleman who was staying at the Hill, and had been down—of course I thought he meant the minute before. So then I thought it as well not to inquire at the post-office. Indeed I was glad to get off, for I have had to go after so many people there, that they must think I know curiously little of the movements of my friends. By the way, those new people came to the Lodge yesterday. We must call at once, Helen."

"But how did you find out about Sir George?" said Helen.

She and Lily were both looking rather crest-fallen. Sir George gone—what had Mr Smith been about? Gone too, perhaps.

"I met Hunt. He had just been to the Hill. Smith has had a nasty feverish attack. Cold and sore throat, and that sort of thing. Sir George had been gone some days."

The girls' faces brightened. A cold was infinitely better than a friend. A cold could be treated for, easily. Their misgivings gave way to cheerful hope.

"Do you know," said Mr Tolleton, striking his thumbs in his waistcoat-pockets, and looking serious, "I think I ought to have called upon Sir George. It never occurred to me till too late, but I am afraid he will have taken it amiss. What do you think, Helen?"

Oh, nonsense, papa!" replied Helen, not very respectfully. "Sir George must have been here only two days, and how were we to be supposed to know he was here at all? If it had been a longer visit!"

"Well, but the time before. The time he came to luncheon."

"He left almost directly. I found out that for

you. I meant you to have called if he had only stayed three days. But I don't think we want him. The thing is now, what can we do for Mr Smith?"

Mr Tolleton looked astonished at this trifling way of dismissing a grave business. Sir George Lorrimer had been neglected. He had not been called upon. It was the girls who were to blame. Why had he not been packed off with his cards, and the inevitable note in his pocket? They ought to have seen to it, and now they did not care. Helen had called it "nonsense."

Helen was deep in thought. "Could you not lend him books?"

"Who? Mr Smith? My dear, he has a fine library. What books could I take him that he has not got already?"

"He might consider it an attention."

"Pay him attention in some other way. There are plenty of things he would rather have than books," said Mr Tolleton, judging by himself. "Go up and see him."

"PAPA! But you can go."

"Ay, I knew it would be that. A nasty new avenue, too, that spoils all my boots. Well, I suppose I must, though he won't thank me for coming, much. Can't you come with me, Helen?"

"No indeed, papa, it would never do."

"Why not? We could go by the plantation and the short cut, and nobody be the wiser."

"Mr Smith would."

"Well, he would be delighted."

"I daresay he might, but all the same——" Then she stopped to consider. "If I felt sure he would not think it improper, I should like to go very much."

"Improper! What an idea!" cried Lily. "Helen playing propriety?"

"You never will see," retorted Helen, angrily, "that it is not I. I don't care two straws about those things myself, I'm not such a prig. But I certainly do not wish to take all the trouble of going up to see Mr Smith, if it is only to go down in his opinion."

Then she thought of her walk to the view. To go up, under her father's wing, and pay Mr Smith a

visit as an invalid, and an old gentleman, was not, she well knew, half as improper in reality as their taking a private walk together by appointment.

But there was something in going to the *house*. There was something in facing the servants, in walking past the windows. She gave to every consideration its due weight.

"If I do go——" she began.

"Go? Yes, by all means," interrupted her sister. "Go, and suggest tolu and paregoric, and all the rest of it. Go, and be as charming as ever you can. Now is your time. You will do him more good than all the medicines in Dr Hunt's medicine-chest. I would go too, only I think it might look more affectionate your going alone."

Helen looked dubious. She did not care for its looking so very affectionate, but neither did she wish for her sister's company. She liked to have Mr Smith all to herself.

"Well, will you come?" inquired her father.

"I think I will. It is not as if he could think himself a young man. And we can go, as you say, by the plantation. We might merely ask how he is,

you know; and if we are asked in, you might go, and leave me outside, or something of that sort. If he is sitting in the drawing-room, he will see us pass, and know I am there. Then if he asks me to go in, I could do it. After all, I think I will go."

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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